THE 7 HABITS THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE FOREVER

Best Selling Author

ADAM HOUGE

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THE 7 HABITS THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE FOREVER

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The 7 Habits That Will Change Your Life Forever™ by Adam Houge

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INTRODUCTION

Habits have power. Power to build up your life and power to tear it down. God calls us to establish His perfect habits by which we can be transformed daily. How you choose to use your habits will determine your destiny. In this book, we'll discuss the 7 greatest habits any Christian can employ. Applying these concepts in your life will change you forever. Those of you who have already employed these habits can testify that they have changed your life and will change everyone else's as well.

Habit One

Love

LOVE IS THE most basic need for human life. Without love, we wouldn't even exist! As the stomach needs food to eat and the lungs need air to breathe, even so the heart needs love. What could be more impactful and life changing than finding out that you're loved, especially when your heart is yearning for it? But not every form of love is alike, and not every form of love results in a fulfilling life.

Not every type of love satisfies, and not every type of love is right. The world would tell you to love yourself like no tomorrow. But if you only focus on making yourself happy and following your own heart, it will lead to roads of disaster in the long run. Remember that happiness is not only a reflection of what happens to you outwardly but who you are inwardly. How you react to the circumstances of life will determine how good or how bad your life may be. But the circumstances of life and the way we're treated still matters. For these conditions augment our overall state of happiness.

While you can take life with stride, and should, it doesn't always have to be hard. People don't always have to treat you like trash. Circumstances don't always have to collapse around you. There are ways to change how life treats us by changing how we approach life, live it out, and treat others.

These changes of our personal behavior, beliefs, reactions to, and outlook on life can be broken down into seven simple habits. With love being the first habit, we need to discern between right love and wrong love. Love can be wrong, especially if it breaks the law of a clean conscience.

Life can be better if you're willing to accept the wrongs you do. If you love perfectly, you'll first learn to admit your mistakes to perceive how you have hurt others, and you'll be willing to change your behavior. By following a lifelong code of self-improvement, you can grow beyond your borders to become not only a blessing to others but blessed because of how others perceive you.

If you love with good love then, for the most part, people will treat you right. But if you love with wrong love, then you'll gain more enemies than friends. Not every form of love benefits our greater sense of joy or that of others. If you only love yourself, then you'll be despised, others will treat you for what you're worth, and your life will be terrible. But if you learn to be a continuously charitable, loving, and kind person, life has a way of repaying you for it. It's a true statement that what goes around comes around. But not enough people take this to heart.

Everyone believes themselves to be a good person at some level, but this isn't about being good. This is about an objective—an objective to love unconditionally, even in the hardest of circumstances. Why? Because the seeds of love produce the beneficial fruits of life, liberty, and joy.

If you make a wholehearted commitment to the right things, seeking constantly to benefit others, it will benefit you in the end. Though, a truly good hearted person wouldn't seek to be benefitted but would just do rightly with or without reward. Like a farmer, who after much hard work yields a harvest, so you will enjoy the fruits of a good life after doing rightly for a long time.

Now, we all think of ourselves to be good people. But this thought process can be poison for our growth in character, morality, spirituality, and mentality. If we can't look for the wrong in ourselves, we'll never see the reason for change. Therefore we should always look at ourselves through a lens of humility, willing to admit our weaknesses and accept our needs for growth.

Everyone needs change because no one is perfect. If one doesn't want to change but enjoys the complacency of a fruitless life, then they need to understand that the hardships of life are there to prod them into a better mentality. But if you seek to grow and search the right places for that growth, you'll find an eternal blessing with the fruit of joy in the end.

Now, this search must take place not in our own heart but in the place of truth. If the truth was in us naturally, then why would we need to grow and change? While we seek to be honest and truthful people, it doesn't mean that eternal, moral, or ultimate truth can be resolved in our own hearts. That resolution belongs in the hands of God, who renders it to our being through the way we approach Him in life.

Now, if we are people who are prone to self-love, life has a way of teaching us a lesson. But if we learn to walk in truly selfless love toward all others, it can change our lives forever and for the better. This isn't to say that bad things will always happen to bad people and good people get off the hook. As we know, that isn't true. But this is to say that the general circumstances of life are better for those that have pursued love for others.

How so? Consider the mother who cherished her children a little more than other parents. In the days of her weakness and old age, who is there to take care of her? One of her children no doubt. Now consider a truly selfish father. Not the typical one who loves his children and raises them right. But the one who gets what he wants from a woman, leaves the scene, and lets her raise the children alone. Now when he's too sick to work, too poor to retire, and has nowhere to turn, who will help him? The child he never loved? I think not.

These may be extreme examples, but we all know the goodness a love-filled heart can bring. For when we learn to love others, they also will repay us with the same in due and proper time. If you want to be loved and to be changed by the power of love, first you need to learn to love others perfectly. This begins with the general search for perfect truth and personal growth and the need for admitting when we're wrong. If we can't confess our own failings and hate them, we can never embrace the love of a better life.

We all have our own mental images of success, and we all think of it in a slightly different way than another person. But what we imagine success to be isn't always the core of reality. When you think of success, what do you think of? Just sit for a moment and think of a successful person and imagine who they are, what they look like, the things they have, and how they act.

When you think about this person, let me ask you one thing. Are they rich, famous, or beautiful? If they are any of these, then your mental image of real success isn't aligned with reality. Just because a person is rich, famous,

or beautiful doesn’t mean they have a good life. A truly good life is defined not by the material things we try to fill ourselves with but by the spiritual and emotional things that we are already filled with. These things lead to a constant state of happiness.

Now, some of you reading this may have imagined a rich or famous person, but now after my last statement would say, “Well, I know this already, and that sort of person isn’t successful.” But if you really knew this, then why did you imagine them the wrong way? Because deep down inside, whether you realize it or not, you believe it to be success, even if subconsciously.

Why else would you have imagined that? But this is because society has so deeply ingrained it in your mind what success should and shouldn’t look like, that even if you consciously know better, your subconscious believes differently. If we think, even subconsciously, that our material things lead to happiness, we will lead a materialistic life even if we don’t intend to.

This is where we make the separation between belief and knowledge. We don’t believe in what we know, but we know what we believe. Yet we don’t always realize what we’re believing and so must make course corrections in our pursuit of faith and life. Now, the things we believe aren’t always right, unless they line up with reality and the existentially eternal truth. Therefore we must be willing to admit where we falter and pursue a greater sense of thought and faith.

If you don’t pursue these things, you won’t find the benefit of a better and more fulfilling life. But if you do pursue them, then you’ll agree with the sound wisdom of perfect love. If we love perfectly, we will reap the benefits of love. Perhaps not in all people, but in many it will be so. Even as we can’t reap a big harvest from every plot of ground, so we won’t always reap love from those we bless. But you will reap significantly more than if you had never planted. If we don’t take this to heart, we won’t reap these benefits, which is a sorry loss for those who choose complacency over compassion.

When you look out for your own best interest while forsaking others’ needs, wants, and desires, it will ruin your relationships. You could gain all the money in the world serving yourself, but if an abundant life is all you’re after, then the end result will be bitterness. While you may not actually be after the material things of life, if you imagined a rich person as successful,

then your subconscious, internal person is.

Your heart is saying one thing, and your flesh is saying another. The solution? Pursue the heart. But not our own hearts. We must pursue the heart of God while blessing the hearts of those around us. But if anyone thinks otherwise, is it really worth it to gain the whole world to benefit only yourself and lose your family, your friends, and your soul in the process?

A truly successful person is not the business man with a secretly broken life. Success is the very old, poor widow whose son loves her so much that he won't leave her side. She poured love into his heart for all his life, and she reaped love in the end. Although her beloved husband died, she still has a companion in her son. Now in her time of need, there is always someone there for her; not only to love and cherish her but to nourish her needs until the day she dies. Her son will nourish her heart, and because of her faithfulness to love him, she has reaped an abundant blessing of joy.

Success isn't getting that raise or promotion. Success isn't that trophy or that hard-earned thing you wanted in life. Success isn't about what you do for yourself but what you do for others while embracing what God has done for you.

True success mends the broken heart and heals the shattered spirit. It mends a family and keeps it a tightly knit group of friends rather than enemies always at each other's throats. True success is a solid marriage rather than a broken or lost one. True success is helping someone who wants to die realize that life is worth living because you love them. Real success produces life and blesses the soul.

If you love with a sincere heart, then life will bless you in the end. Sincere love is to show love without expecting anything in return. In so doing, you will reap a blessing naturally because you sowed the proper seeds. Not always will you reap, as you know. Not every plot of land is suited for growing and harvesting. Yet a perfect heart would love the unlovable anyway. For who knows if such a person would turn around? Then by your changing a life, your hard work will go forward to produce fruit in them and in those whom you have inspired.

Indeed, success begins with the place of the heart and goes forward to bless your life in ways you never thought possible. It doesn't mean that your life will always be easy or happy. It means that when hardships come, you'll

be pulled through with a smile on your face. It means that when a storm of life comes upon you, you won't merely make it through but will become a stronger person because of your trial. Success begins with our hearts and our states of mind, then progresses forward to create the most enriching and rewarding life that anyone could find.

While you may never become a millionaire, you'll feel like a million bucks in your heart. As we already know, money doesn't solve everything. Maybe it can take care of your immediate needs and wants, but the day you lose it all will be the day you truly lose everything if a materialistic life is all you've lived for.

Money can't buy everything and especially not wholesome, heart-filling love. It'll buy vain friends, who'll leave you when you lose your money, but that's about it. That is why love is better.

Love is the greatest medicine for the sick heart. It's the greatest filler of the holes in our hearts. Without it, a person could never live life to the fullest. Without love, a person wouldn't exist at all. For if a man and woman didn't love one another, then where did you come from?

But not all love is the same. There is love for money, which can lead to agony; love for self-beauty, which is vanity; love for another's beauty, which is really just lust; love for self, which can lead to broken relationships; selfless love for others, which can lead to satisfying relationships; and a love for God, which can lead to an incredible, enriching, and deeply rewarding relationship with Him. There are many forms of love, but only a few are worth living out.

There is little that is more rewarding or enriching than changing a person's life through kindness. Kindness, which is a work of love, is the greatest creator of friends. Kindness can give you a legacy and leave a lasting impression and memory about you.

When you die, how do you want people to remember you? As a cruel, selfish, and shrewd miser who only cared about yourself or a loving and kind person who is sorely missed because you added meaning to their lives? Do you want your children to be secretly happy you're dead so they can inherit your livelihood or broken because they lost their best friend? The legacy you leave behind also determines the legacy you'll take with you when you die. What you leave behind will determine the blessing that lies ahead.

Consider also how love affects the family. Children who grow up without feeling loved leave the house and start searching for love in all the wrong places. They go from broken relationship to broken relationship and from foolish thing to foolish thing, breaking their hearts and others' time and time again. They were never raised to understand true love and thus must learn it through the school of hard knocks.

A truly loving parent should not only meet the needs of a child's physical life but also of their spiritual and emotional life as well. A loving parent should teach their child how to love, how love works, and how to use it to approach God and others. This God-given duty is on the shoulders of the parents and not the Sunday school teacher. A child should learn the true meaning of love and God daily through the ones they're closest to, not once a week from someone they hardly know. If they don't learn from their parents, they'll think their parents don't agree with what they're being taught. Why? Because they don't experience it daily from their parents. They know that if it meant that much to Mom and Dad, they would practice it daily and take the time to teach their children these principles.

Many parents are so caught up in trying to provide food, clothing, and other necessities that they forget to cherish the relationships they have now. They watch their children grow, work hard to provide, and tell themselves their children will be fine. But on the inside, their kids are secretly broken for a deeper relationship with their mom and dad.

Sometimes we focus so hard on filling their stomachs and clothing their flesh that we forget to fill their hearts. We work so hard to love our children that sometimes we forget to actually love them in the end!

First things should be first. If your family doesn't have food, then yes, you should work hard to provide. But if missing that one day of overtime to spend some one-on-one quality time with your child won't hurt you, then why not focus on building a healthy family? Money isn't everything. There are more needs than we pay attention to, and your children *need* your love. As much as the stomach needs food, their hearts need love as well. If you'd work so hard to feed them, then why wouldn't you spend more one-on-one time with them to show them how cherished they are?

Remember that they'll only be in your house for so long. Whatever you planted in them while they were small will determine what you'll reap when

they're grown. Don't be deceived! There isn't always time on another day. Take the time now while you have it! Don't put off tomorrow what you can do today. Real love would choose to be expressed immediately, not later when it seems more convenient. Cherish your children now, and nourish their hearts with your love.

They can't function without it, not even as adults. If they grow up without knowing they're loved, they'll never know how to love. They'll be broken because of their parents and then move on to break themselves, others, and their children through misunderstanding how love works. But the cycle of brokenness can be stopped by one parent who decides to buck the trend.

A story I often share is of a man whose life changed forever through his son. He was always caught up in working hard for his family and trying to provide but failed to spend the time he should have with his children. He wanted to give them the brightest future possible, so he put in a lot of hours and missed special days. He felt as though these days mattered, but he felt their financial future was the greatest good. Later he realized that missing those days of work wouldn't have dented him, and they should have been spent bonding with his children.

One night when his son was sixteen, his whole life changed. He gave his son permission to go out with his girlfriend that night, then because he had to work the early shift, he slipped off to bed while his son went out. At about midnight he was awakened by a knock. Coming to the door, he was met by two state troopers.

"Sir, do you know where your son is at this time?" they asked him. "Yeah, he's out with his girlfriend. Why? Is there something wrong, officers?" He asked, thinking his boy had done something to get in trouble.

They took their hats off and hung their heads low. "I'm sorry, sir, but there's been a terrible accident. I'm afraid your son is not going to make it…." His heart stood still.

"WHERE IS HE?!"

"He's at the hospital, sir."

In a frantic rush, he threw on his coat and raced to see his boy. Everything seemed surreal as he begged God for a miracle. "This can't be happening! Oh God! This can't be happening! Please God, NO!" He prayed

within himself.

When he found his son in the hospital room, he embraced him immediately. He looked into his son's eyes, which were shadowed by a bloody face.

"I love you, Dad. I'm sorry about the car," his boy said with a rattle in his voice.

"I love you," he said, weeping over him.

Then his son died in his arms. That was the last time he ever held his boy, and that was the last time he ever looked into his baby's eyes. He can never get back those days with him. They're gone forever.

It took something as horrible as that to change his thinking. He didn't realize that it wasn't about his hard work but about building a healthy family founded on love. Broken, he changed his life forever, vowing to never miss another moment of his children's lives again. From that point forward, he was there for his kids in everything, always.

I met him ten years after this happened. But he was still as broken as the first day. Even though we release things to God, sometimes the hurt doesn't fully go away. Losing a child is like losing a limb. Although you may survive and can heal, something major is still missing from your life. Sometimes there are things we wish we could have back that we can't. He wanted his days back with his son that he could make them right again, but he'll never have them back.

Don't make this mistake! Love your children like there's no tomorrow! Make them see and feel that love. Don't put off what can be done today, and get it right while you can! Build your family with a firm foundation that can't be shaken by the trials of life.

If you're searching for a better life and want to build a better family, then love is the answer, and love will find the way! Even if you lose everything, you'll always have each other. If a family doesn't help each other and take care of one another, it will lead to a horribly difficult life for everyone. Each member of a family should support one another, love one another, and save each other from the trials of life. The individual members of a family must support each other like the beams in a building. If those beams don't hold each other up, then in time of calamity, the whole structure will collapse.

Take the time to cherish your children and remember how valuable they are. Bond with them, and build friendships with them. Show them love through the quality time you spend with them. Get to know them, and watch it change your life as you transform theirs.

America could never have a better time for this message. Families are breaking, and there are more single mothers now than ever. Children are raised without fathers, and parents are too busy to spend time with their children. It's leading to a variety of issues of the heart that are leaving people discontented and searching for meaning in life.

Fatherless families have become so common in the American life that even the current president at the time of this writing was raised without one. Family is the foundation of America. When the foundation of any building crumbles, it compromises its integrity and strength. Even so, the strength and integrity of America may wane, beginning in the place of an individual's heart.

If enough people enter into politics having come from broken families or broken lives, it can affect the overall strength of the nation through their opinions and views on life, love, and morality. When the core of a family is affected, it can truly affect all people at some point in time or another.

Whether you've been effected by a broken family or not, without a doubt there has been someone in your life who has come from one. Whether your neighbor, coworker, friends, or extended family, there is someone. If every person can think of someone who had a broken family, it shows you how common this disease is.

Don't let this condition plague your life! Love your family like no tomorrow. The mortar of every relationship is love. All the bonds of friendship begin with the heart. So work on your own heart that you can cherish other's as well.

How we relate to others can determine how easy or how difficult our lives will be. If you're too busy trying to take care of yourself, there will be a day when you'll wish you did more to bond with a friend or family member before they died. By then it's too late to take your choices back. Don't live life with regrets! Remember that there are no regrets in perfect love.

Indeed, the most rewarding experiences don't come from how we love ourselves but how we love others. If we spend more time filling up other

people, it will result in a tangible reward that can be felt and experienced in this life.

Now, true and sincere love wouldn't be loving someone with the hope of getting a reward out of it. True love is expressed without regard for self. For example, consider the depths of a mother's love. True love can be examined in a mother's life.

There was a woman I knew of who had shown the ultimate example of perfect love. She and her three preteen girls decided to spend the day playing on a beach on Lake Michigan. There was a current by the beach that they weren't aware of, and when they were swimming, it pulled all three of her children out into open water. She swam out to save them but couldn't do it without half drowning herself. So without regard for her own life, she fought the current and brought each child in one by one. Then because she exerted herself so much, she collapsed and died on the beach at the feet of her children. She knew she'd die, but without a second thought, she gave herself to save them because her love for them meant more than her own life.

Love truly is better than life, and without it, our lives can never find substance or meaning. Love should be the core of who we are and reflected in all our actions. This mother reflected it in her actions. She told her children she loved them, but they probably didn't realize how much they were loved until she willfully gave her life to save them.

This is the practical love that changes a person forever. When we love others without regard for self, it can change a life. There is little that can change your life forever and for the better than being loved like this. And when we love selflessly, it creates an upright and morally productive heart in us.

It's not that we should go about sacrificing everything we have without regard for our own needs. It's that we should learn to sacrifice in the little things of life to cherish others, even if we have to suffer a little to relieve someone who has been suffering a long time. Like giving bone marrow to a cancer patient, we should meet a person's urgent needs and not fear going through a trial to save someone from theirs. Yet we should have the heart to sacrifice a big thing if it means loving with sincerity like that mother did.

Nothing can change you more profoundly than true love. If you've ever felt empty at some point in life, imagine what it would have been like to be

cherished in those moments. If you've ever felt as if you needed a friend, imagine what it would have been like to have someone care about you and seek a friendship with you. Not just anybody but someone who counts you as worth something and treats you with value.

If ever you've gone through a hard and difficult moment in life, imagine what it would have been like to have someone reach down and help you out of your situation. Imagine how it feels to be loved in the deepest sense. This is what we should do for others. A true hero is defined by a single selfless act. What then are we if we learn to be selfless at all times?

Pure love fills the heart and gives purpose to life. I may even be so bold as to claim that love is the meaning of life. Love is the purpose and the meaning everyone searches for, whether they realize it or not. Whether you're rich or poor, love is a basic necessity that a person must never go without. To be loved with sincerity by a person who is willing to give up everything to cherish you fills you with the deepest sense of joy and purpose.

There is a daily love like this that we can experience that transforms our lives. Not a love that we give but a love that we have been given. A love that every heart needs. This love is found in God, who cherishes you and treasures you beyond anything you could ever imagine.

When we forget the loving nature of God, the way we approach Him turns into dry religion. God did not send His Son to die for mere religion. He came for the purpose of loving you to have a relationship with you.

God desires a relationship with you at an individual level. He is a very intimate and relational Person who loves you. He knows you perfectly but still wants to know you in a deeper sense.

He has known everything about you since before He created time. Before He made all things, He's been dreaming of you: how He would make you and who you'd be. He's imagined how you would respond to life and how life would respond to you.

He has known every joy you'd have and every hurt you'd feel. He has known every pain that would come on your life, and for thousands of years He's been waiting to hold you through them all. He has loved you before you ever took your first breath. There has never been and never will be one who cherishes you more than He does.

Before He made all things, He dreamed of a life with you. He

considered how wonderful it would be to treasure you, hold you, and have you as His own child. Then, because He loved the thought of you so much, He set out to create earth; a place to meet with His new special friend—you.

For thousands of years He watched your life unfold in His mind. He knew everything you'd do and every way that you'd sin. Now, every sin, no matter how small it may be, separates us from God. When we're separated from Him, it breaks His heart. There isn't a single sin that we commit that doesn't hurt Him. But God, knowing the ways you'd break His heart, still chose to create you because He still loved you.

Now let's consider our own hearts for a moment. What do we think of those who hurt us daily? Are they our friends or enemies? Our enemies no doubt. But we hurt God every day, and He's so loving that He chose not only to create us but to die for us to save us. How can that not affect our hearts? We, acting more like an enemy than a friend, were so cherished that He died for us to save us. How many of your enemies would you die for? But God did this because His love is perfect, and He hoped to change your life through His perfect love.

Two thousand years ago He humbled Himself in the sight of heaven and earth and came down as a man. He, being the Lord of heaven, knew no pain and no suffering. He had perfect peace in His perfect world. But when we sin, it keeps us from being able to enter that place of His rest with Him. This made Him feel as if heaven wouldn't be heaven for Him without you. So He stepped down from His lordly throne and humbled Himself to become a man, knowing what He'd suffer for your sake.

From the day of His birth, He suffered. As soon as He came into the world, Herod sought to murder Him. Upon being born, His trials of life began. So for His safety, He was carried off to Egypt until His enemy died. After He grew, He began His ministry and was forced to starve in the desert with no food and no water for forty days. Then, after being horribly afflicted and tempted, He passed the Father's test and set out to save you.

From the first day of His ministry Jesus was homeless. He didn't own or rent a home but stayed with strangers when they allowed Him. If He couldn't get a place to stay, He had to spend the night in the wilderness. What would He do if it rained? What would He do on the cold winter nights or if it snowed?

The days of His ministry were by no means enjoyable. He was constantly under death threats, many of His disciples left Him, and some whom He blessed were never grateful. He poured Himself out for everyone but was despised and rejected, living in the wilderness while waiting to be betrayed to His death by His friend Judas.

He knew before He even came to this world that He'd be rejected and killed. He knew that His own friend would stab Him in the back and hand Him over to death. He knew His brothers, the sons of His mother, would reject Him and mock Him. He knew all these things in advance but chose to come down and suffer them with the hope of convicting you through His love.

If He didn't suffer all these things, neither you nor I could be saved. God has a judgment coming to establish peace. He will rid creation of evil and bless the good. God by no means wants to condemn us. He is not a condemning person but a loving and gracious one. He didn't give His life so He could condemn. He gave His life to convict us that we might repent of our sins and not have to suffer the judgment.

He can't stand the thought of living life without you. By His sacrifice, He has shown you that He'd rather give up His throne and live homeless in the wilderness, allowing the rain to cover His head. He has shown you that He'd rather be rejected by His friends and be handed over to death. He would rather be despised by His own family and rejected by His own nation. He would rather be beaten, punched in the face, spit on, mocked, whipped, scourged almost to death, and murdered on a cross than spend another moment in eternity without you. You have meant everything to Him! He made you to love you and cherish you, not condemn you.

But He does have perfect justice. He will rid the world of evil, and if we choose to spit on His gift, we are calling a curse on ourselves. He never wanted to condemn us. Jesus tells us that the eternal fire was created for Satan and the fallen angels.

No matter what, He will always love you. Whether you choose to have a relationship with Him or not, He will still love you. But if you don't choose to love Him and be filled with His love and His saving grace, then He will lead you to the place *you* wanted to go. With grief in His heart and tears in His eyes, He'll love you all the way to gates of Hell.

It’s your choice whether to love Him or not. He gave His Son’s life with the hope of convicting you of your sin that you might repent. God doesn’t seek your condemnation; He seeks your salvation. When we sin, whether we intend to or not, we make ourselves His enemy. Now, think about it for a moment: could you give your child’s life to convict and save *your* enemy? Certainly not. But that’s what God did for you, and that’s how much God loves you.

Someone may think they’ve done something so horrible that they don’t deserve God’s love. The truth is that no one deserves it, but He freely gives His love to all. He wants to save you! No matter where you’ve been or what you’ve done, God wants to give you a new heart and transform your life forever.

He does love you, no matter who you are. Even if you’ve ever felt as if you can’t love yourself, God still loves you. Can you believe that? Remember that we approach God by faith. Can you have faith that God is better than you and can still love you even when you wouldn’t love yourself? Believe in His love, and let it change your life forever!

But if you don’t respond rightly to His love and enter into a relationship with Him, then you’re missing the point of the cross. There could be nothing more romantic, nothing more loving, nothing more powerful, and nothing more heroic than what Jesus did. If He didn’t give His life, neither you nor I could be saved from Hell. This is something that should never be taken for granted!

Consider giving your life to Christ today. If this is something you’ve never done before but you want Him in your life, come before Him in prayer. Truly, His love and His grace will change your life forever, and no matter what you’ve done, He will forgive you and clean you. Pray and confess your sins to Him. There’s nothing hard or religious about it. Just talk to Him. He’s been waiting for you for a long time, and He’s excited! So formalities are not necessary.

Jesus gave His life to convict you of sin that you’d change your life, run from sin, and be saved from judgment. So confess your sins and tell Him that you repent and want to change. Take the time to recount them and regret them. Being sorry suggests that you will have sorrow from your actions. True repentance begins with regret. So ask Him to forgive you, to give you a

second chance, and to give you His Holy Spirit. Ask Him to be your Lord and Savior forever.

Then dedicate yourself to live for Him from this time forward, never looking back to those things that separated you from Him. If you're sincere, God will give you a new heart and His Spirit. When His Spirit enters you, it will feel as if you've taken your first breath, and it will be as if you've never breathed at all before that moment. The whole world will come alive, and everything will feel alive in a way you've never experienced before.

Pray, and approach God with love, conviction, and faith. Be convicted and confess your sin. Turn from it out of love for Him. Have faith that He loves you, will forgive you, and will give you a new heart and a new chance.

Although you may not always be blessed in life, you'll always have God with you to comfort you, encourage you, and carry you through. He will give you His strength to make it through the hardest times and make you a stronger person in the process. God will allow some trials in your life, not to hurt you, but to draw you nearer to Him and to grow you.

Consider that if a plant could feel, it wouldn't enjoy being pruned. Neither do we enjoy trials, but if we have the right heart, we will grow closer to the Lord through them. The closer you are to Him, the stronger you'll become. Not because of your own strength, but due to your faith, God's strength will be with you to cherish you, love you, and save you from every form of evil that comes your way.

God

When God's love has transformed our lives, it gives us an indescribable inner peace. But giving our life to Him isn't a one-time thing. It's an ongoing process as we learn to live for Him on a daily basis. Every day He continues to work on our hearts. He transforms us season after season through lessons in life.

However, unless we press forward in a daily walk with Him, we will never experience the true depths of a relationship with Him. This is where love enters. If we really love God, then we'll naturally want to be nearer to Him.

Consider any relationship. Do we not seek to draw near to those we love? Likewise, we must draw near to the Lord *daily*. If we love Him, we will

continue in the things we began.

We must abstain from sin, humble ourselves, praise Him frequently, and pray without ceasing. But we can't do these things except through the Holy Spirit and His power. In order to be filled with the love of God, we must spend much time in His presence. Then, as we seek Him, He'll fill us up in His love and comfort us in His Spirit. Afterward, having been filled by Him, we can step forward to bless others with the same love that He gives us.

We must be filled before we can be poured out. An empty glass doesn't satisfy one's thirst. Become a full glass through the outpouring of God. Let God fill you up with His love so that you can be used to pour out on others. All ministering is an overflow of the personal time we spend with Jesus. I'm not merely talking about a "ministry" but all the ways we minister Christ to one another through love.

Indeed, Jesus calls us to shine our lights that others may see our works of love and glorify the Father. We are more like glow-sticks than light bulbs. We give off the light of Christ only from having spent time in His light. So be refreshed in God's Spirit, and let Him comfort you. Let God minister to your heart before you minister to others. Remember your continual Sabbath by resting in the Holy Spirit always. Cease from the works of the flesh, and let the Holy Spirit work through you instead as you learn to incline your ear to him. Listen to the Holy Spirit, and obey His voice. Seek to be led by Him, for He will never lead you astray.

If we love the Lord, we will seek to grow in His word and multiply our wisdom in it. Faith comes by hearing God's word, and righteousness comes through applying it. Be faithful to seek the Lord continually and to grow in the faith.

Pay attention to His teachings in life. Each season of life has a lesson, and if you're not learning or growing, then something is wrong. Even a pastor or elder should always be growing somehow. God is infinite and perfect. We are called to be as perfect as our Father is. Even Jesus said,

> "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

If you are not yet perfected, then you should always be growing until you are. Seeing that no one is perfect, we should all be growing. But what

perfects us, and how do we find it? What do we read?

> "But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection." (Col. 3:14)

Love fulfills the law. As we walk in the Spirit, we fulfill the law naturally. Why? The first fruit of the Spirit is love. Knowing that we're perfected by love, we should be looking for every opportunity to apply it. Consider those around you and always ask yourself, "How can I serve this person? How can I bless them? How can I love them with sincerity?"

Always be seeking to practice and apply the love of God. Open your eyes to need that God may lead you to fill it. So many Christians know that they need to apply this, but how many are really doing it? How many times have you given a helping hand to someone you knew needed it? Change your heart and how you approach others, and watch God change your life.

Seek the Lord to receive His love, give His love you received, then repeat the process. Devote yourself to this. But before you can give God's perfect love, first you must sensitize yourself to His voice.

The Holy Spirit will lead you and show you how to practice love. Remember that obedience to His conviction leads to purity, holiness, and perfection. His first fruit is also love. If you continuously listen to the Holy Spirit and obey Him, you will fulfill the works of love naturally and perfectly. God will always show you the right path and always warn you before you sin.

Many Christians don't always hear these things from God. Why? Because they either haven't been listening, don't know that they need to listen, or have difficultly discerning His voice. If this is you, then know that God is always speaking, and you should always be listening and obeying. This does require effort on our part—effort to obey and to watch for every opportunity to show God's love. Not that this is a "salvation by works" mentality but rather it's about doing the right thing because we love God.

If we love the Lord, we will seek to grow in our relationship with Him. We must learn to continuously walk in the Spirit and obey Him. Just because we have the Spirit doesn't mean we always walk in Him. This is why we must be exhorted:

> “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.” (Gal. 5:25)

The Spirit cannot sin. When we sin, we aren’t walking in Him. If we don’t listen to His voice and aren’t led by it daily, then we’re walking in the flesh, which is also sin. To walk in the Spirit is to hear His voice and obey it. When we walk in the Spirit, we don’t fulfill the lust of the flesh. As it is also written,

> “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” (Gal. 5:16)

Knowing this, it is evident that we don’t always walk in the Spirit, seeing that we have sin. If we say we’re walking in the Spirit while we sin, we’re borderline blaspheming the Holy Spirit. To speak evil of Him is sin. To claim that we’re abiding, meditating, and walking in Him while we sin is speaking evil of the Spirit. If we operate in the Spirit, we will not sin. If we operate in the flesh, we will sin.

Seeing then that we don’t always walk in the Spirit, we must take it to heart. Walking in the Spirit is not a natural process for us unless we meditate on Him. If it were a natural process, then we would not sin. But when we meditate on Him and seek to walk in Him, it becomes natural.

Therefore we must take our relationship with Him seriously. If we love the Lord, we will walk in Him. Now the question remains, “How do we walk in Him?” We walk in Him when we are led by Him. We are led when we listen to and obey His voice. If we aren’t obeying the voice of the Holy Spirit, then we’re sinning. It’s that simple.

If we call ourselves the sons of God then we must be led by the Spirit, which is why we read,

> “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” (Rom. 8:14)

This is what Jesus meant by saying that those born of the Spirit are like the wind. As we also read,

> “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

The world cannot understand the things of the Spirit. We speak the things of the Spirit, which is the sound of the wind that they don't understand. When wind blows, it goes from one point of the earth to the next. Even so, when we are led by the Spirit's voice, they can't comprehend why we do the things we do. But it is evident to us that as we hear the Holy Spirit, so we must obey Him. He leads us in this life that we may partake in His blessings in the next. Hence from God we came and to Him we return; nevertheless, the world doesn't understand these things. This is why we read,

> "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor. 2:14)

Therefore do not seek council from the world nor the wisdom of it, which is contrary to Christ. Seek the Lord and His wisdom. Be serious about a walk with Him, and grow in it. God will lead you to truth in everything. Let Him show you the way, and let Him plan His direction for you.

When you were born again, God began His plan for your life. Even now He has a purpose and a meaning for you. You therefore ought not to be driven by your own purpose but rather serve the Lord from your heart. For all our lives are driven by some sort of purpose or another. But for believers, Christ is the pilot, and we are the passengers of a Christ-driven life.

Remember that He paid a price for you, and you have been bought. You are not your own but Christ's. Therefore live for Christ and take up your cross. A call to live for Jesus is a call to die—to die to this life, the things of it, and your ambitions. He has a purpose and a cause for you. Live it out through obedience to the Spirit.

In order for us to be led by the Spirit, we must obey Him. Then as we walk in faith according to His leading, we walk in Him. Now if anyone is not led by the Holy Spirit's conviction, what are they being led by? Obviously not God. If then it is not the Lord, they are either led by their flesh or Satan, who entices the flesh. To follow either of these is sin. For to live according to the flesh is contrary to Christ, which is why we read,

> "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the

> things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." (Rom. 8:5–7).

To set our mind on the things of this earth is enmity with God. Enmity means "bitter hatred" or "the quality of being an enemy." Although we may not intend to hate God, if we do not take a walk with Him seriously, we certainly aren't loving Him. Just like in a marriage! If you don't take your relationship with your spouse seriously, then you aren't loving them.

Love as a word is an action. Remember that it is a verb. If then we love the Lord, we will do something about it by seeking to please Him and meditating on Him constantly. Even as we are exhorted,

> "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3:1–3)

We must raise our eyes to Christ and keep our focus on Him and His purpose for our lives. We must settle our thoughts in the holiness of Jesus. This is a call to do more than think about God. This is a call to love Him with all our minds and our lives. If we love Him with our minds, we will mediate on His Spirit, filling our thoughts with prayers and praise. If our thoughts are dwelling on the Holy Spirit, they will not be dwelling in sin. Remember, God and sin cannot dwell in the same place at the same time. Therefore allow the Spirit of Christ to consume your thoughts, and sin will not enter.

Every relationship requires communication. We must always make an effort to engage in one-on-one interaction with the Lord throughout the day in the place of our hearts.

Imagine yourself as a disciple following Jesus two thousand years ago. If you ate with Jesus, slept next to Jesus, walked with Jesus, and talked with Jesus, would you be as likely to sin as you would now? Or would His ever continuing presence convict you to please Him?

This is the same concept as continually meditating on the Spirit. In so doing, we are inviting God into every moment of our lives. Rather than being

idle with our thoughts, hearts, and tongues, we should fill the gaps with meaningful intimacy with God. By constantly reflecting on Him and speaking with Him, we will have greater conviction in our lives.

Therefore pray constantly and fervently. Even as it is written,

> "Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5:17–18)

Praying continually helps us to reflect on the Spirit as we ought. Remember that prayer in itself is more of a moment of communication than a moment of supplication. Listen to God as you pray, and be faithful to obey Him. Let Him comfort your heart and refresh you constantly. This world can be a cruel and bitter place. If we don't meditate on the Spirit continually, it will cause us to run on empty constantly. We can't let our lives run on fumes. We need more than just the fumes or aroma of God. We must be fully immersed in the Spirit, walking in Him continually.

Two of the best ways to do this are mentioned in the verse we just read: praying without ceasing and constantly giving thanks. Be one who praises God continually. Immerse yourself deep in prayer and the heart of worship.

Remember that Jesus said the Father desires worshippers in Spirit and truth. When we worship, we do more than sing about God. We aim our praises to Him, directly to His face. You will experience the Spirit more powerfully if you sing, "God, you are holy. You're holy!" versus, "God is holy. He is holy."

Speak directly to God when you worship and when you pray. In so doing, you will be worshipping intimately. Remember that your relationship with Him is intimate. Therefore praise Him intimately and to His face. His Spirit will overshadow you as you worship Him. As you feel His presence with you, meditate on it and focus on it. As you do this, it will sensitize your ears to His voice.

It is easier to hear someone when you pay attention to them and focus on them. So turn toward the One who speaks, and you will hear Him more clearly. But if you focus on the things your flesh wants, then you'll be looking away, and it will be hard to discern what He's saying. If you don't pay attention to Him, His voice will be harder to discern when you decide you want to hear it. When He speaks, you'll have to turn around, face Him,

and ask Him, “What did You say?”

If it’s hard for you to hear God, then it’s likely that your flesh is getting in the way. This is why fasting helps; it sobers the heart. But if you constantly focus on the Spirit as you should, then fasting shouldn’t be necessary to hear from Him. We should only be doing so if we’ve been going the wrong way, regret it, and need clarity and direction.

Thus God, seeing the sincere heart of repentance, answers in due time. But if you persist in the Spirit, you should hear His voice regularly with ease. Though it may be difficult at rare times, only a little prayer and patience should be necessary.

When you hear Him, be faithful to obey him. When you focus on Him, it will increase your conviction, helping you to overcome any issues of sin. If we love Him, we will seek to eradicate the sin in our lives. This can’t be done through trying hard to apply the principles of the law. Rather this is done by meditating on the Spirit and listening to Him. As you listen more, you’ll hear His conviction more. Then by listening to conviction and through having faith, He gives you strength to overcome.

As you meditate on the Spirit, you will feel His presence. This is because you’re focusing on His presence. As you feel His presence and meditate on Him, He will strengthen you to overcome sin.

If you’re caught in the heat of temptation, turn away from the tempting thought or situation, and flee into the arms of God. As you are called,

> “Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” (2 Tim. 2:22)

Then pray for strength. “God, be my strength in my weakness; lead me not into temptation but deliver me from the evil one.” As we also read,

> “And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Cor. 12:9)

And again,

> “And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.” (Matt. 6:13)

If you focus on what tempts you, or even pay slight attention to it, you will fail. You have to ignore God in order to fail. But if you ignore the sin and focus on the Lord, He will fill you and overcome the tempting situation for you.

We are not called to fight temptation but are called to flee lust and tempting situations. So what is the furthest thing from sin and to where do we run? God! Run to the Holy Spirit when you’re caught in temptation, and He will overcome it for you. Chances are that if you’re struggling in the heat of the moment, it’s because you haven’t been meditating on the Spirit. So what’s the solution? Turn back to the Spirit and meditate on Him. Then by showing yourself to be faithful and by relying on Him for strength, He will indeed strengthen you to overcome.

By this we are able to love the Lord perfectly with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Indeed, we love Him when He transforms our heart (loving with heart) and makes us spiritually born again (loving with soul). We love Him as we meditate on His Holy Spirit to hear and obey His voice by which we follow Him (loving with mind). We love Him by overcoming sin and all things through the strength His Holy Spirit provides (loving with strength). Thus as we seek Him for strength, we are loving Him with our strength.

Be centered in God’s love. Be filled by it, and go fill others with the same.

Others

Being filled with God’s love is only half of the equation. Now we need to take that love and affectionately apply it on others. We must become the example of His love in everything we do.

When we were born, God created us with a sense of “selfishness” for our survival. Now, this is not true selfishness, but it is a mentality that everything in this world revolves around our needs. When we were infants, we cried for food. We didn’t care what time of night it was or how tired Mommy and Daddy were; we only knew that we were hungry.

As infants, we demanded to be held and adored. As infants, we would

cry to alert out parents to their need to serve our soiled diapers. Everything about our lives was about ourselves. Infants are needy, and God created humanity with the ability to communicate need on day one of life.

But in order to communicate those needs, we need to be constantly aware of our own person. So on day one we automatically learn to think of only ourselves. As we grow, this mentality doesn't escape us. Even when we clearly can take care of ourselves, we are still plagued with some thoughts that only benefit us.

Now, being adults, God is calling us to grow beyond our borders and share His adult-like, selfless love with all those around us. In order to share His love, we need to become more aware of the needs of others. We need to open our eyes to perceive need and fill it. True love would satisfy need perfectly. If you meet a brother or sister you hardly know and they're struggling, don't merely brush off the need. Meet it perfectly.

We tend to help those we know, but those we don't know, we don't help as we should. Even the world does this. If the world loves their friends but forsakes strangers, how are we setting ourselves apart from the world? How are we being the example of the perfect love of Jesus, which can't be found in the world?

Let us be aware of our own hearts now. Let's examine ourselves. Have we been loving others as we ought? Have we been looking for others' needs and seeking to satisfy them? Love should compel us to bless all those around us.

Not every need is financial. Some need their emotional tanks filled. Some need a helping hand because they lead a difficult or busy life. Some need a friend and are lonely for some company.

There are so many different kinds of needs, and we should be circumspect to them all. Yet above all, we should bless the church before the world.

There are many in the church who bless the world before they bless a Christian. They claim, "Well, my brother in the Lord has God to help him, but who does this unsaved person have?" Well, that unsaved person has made a choice to NOT love God. What does justice tell us? Should those who have loved the Lord and remained faithful to Him receive prolonged trials while the world that hates God is set free?

Yet a believer has God to help them, and you, Beloved, are that tool God wants to use. So let God use you to bless your brethren. For it is written,

> “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

And also,

> “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (Galatians 6:10)

God calls us to relieve the brethren and to love one another. Therefore let us show perfect love by having an equality with one another. For if we love one another as ourselves, we will rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Let those who have possessions give to those who don’t. God calls us to an equality. As we read,

> “For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality. As it is written, ‘He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.’” (2 Cor. 8:13–15)

Knowing this, the early church obeyed this principle of love, and we are called to do the same. As it is also written,

> “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.” (Acts 4:32)

This is what it truly looked like to be a body in Christ. Everything belonged to the church, and the money was distributed by the deacons to the poor. But that’s not how it is anymore! Now deacons collect the money and keep it for the establishment of the Church; that is to say, the money is kept for the building and clergy only and not distributed among the body as it should be.

So how did the early church work, and how would that look today?

Every member would work for money, pay their taxes, then hand over what's left over to the heads of the church. Everything would be divided evenly among all the members. Farmers would bring their crops in to the body until everyone was fed, then the rest would be sold. If any of these members fell into need, a distribution fund would be sent to them immediately. It would pay for their monthly mortgage if they got behind. It would pay for their groceries. If anyone lost a job, the whole community would come together to help them find one. Until that person found one, the money would still be given to them evenly. If they were take advantage of the church, they would be cut off until they repent. As it is written,

> "For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread." (2 Thessalonians 3:10–12)

Everyone had to work, and if work couldn't be found, they had to be willing to work or be cut out of the fund. No one would have owned anything. But everyone would use what they had and give with a cheerful heart if anyone had need. In today's terms, if someone's lawn mower broke and they were too poor to obtain a new one, someone would share theirs every time they needed it without complaining until that person could get their own. No one did anything to take advantage of each other or inconvenience one another, but everyone chose to love and take care of one another.

Who has ever heard of anything like this today? It doesn't exist. People are after their own hearts, objectives, and goals and don't lay down their lives to live out God's love and plan. But if we all took up our place together, this life would be more of a utopia for us. The elderly widow would be set for life. The cancer patient in the church wouldn't owe a dime. The single mother of four whose house burned down would have a place to live until her next home could be built free of charge.

It isn't that hard to live like this, but no one does. Rather than eating our bread in peace, we work our tails off for our own toys in life. We condemn

those who follow their heart but secretly follow our own and call it something else.

If we are going to show love, then we need to show it perfectly—both toward the Lord and each other. Now, this type of community will probably never exist in this day and age. In real terms, working with what we're given, we should at least have the heart to help one another out to our fullest capacity.

Granted, you can't convince the church to have all things in common because not many want to do that. But you can express love by meeting a person's needs perfectly. If it is not in your resources or power to do so, then try to bring together the hands that can. Many hands make light work, and we shouldn't have to be burdened to ease another. But they shouldn't have to be burdened either.

So whenever you see a brother or sister in need, ask yourself, how can we be made equal without either of us having to suffer? Then you'll find your answer to show perfect love. Be diligent to do it, and watch it transform your life as God does a work in your heart. As you seek to transform others in the love of God, it will change your life as well. Remember these things and apply them.

Now regarding the unbeliever and those who act as an enemy to you: be diligent to love them, helping them out of their needs as well. Only then will you show perfect love even as Jesus has done for you. For while we were yet sinners and enemies of God, Jesus died for us to save us. He gave His life to redeem His enemies. How much more should we be convicted by the love of God and do good to those who hate us?

If you love an unbeliever, then make a distinction between you and them. Do not befriend the world lest you be influenced to become like the world. Some may argue that Jesus was a friend of sinners, but remember that the sinners wanted to hear Jesus, change their lives, and accept Him as Savior. He didn't befriend those who rejected Him. Consider that the Pharisees rejected Him, thus He didn't commune with them. Likewise let us not befriend those who refuse Jesus lest we be influenced to walk in the sins they love.

That we shouldn't befriend the world is evident:

> “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” (James 4:4)

As we know, enmity literally means “bitter hatred toward.” If you befriend the world that hates Him, then God says you’re hating Him as well. Hence the Lord said,

> “Therefore ‘Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.’” (2 Cor. 6:17)

You don’t have to be their friend to show them love. The world only shows love to friends. If they understand that you’re not friends but love them by your works, they’ll be more receptive to the gospel. Why? Because you’re showing them a love they’ve never seen nor known before. Remember that it is the loving-kindness of Christ that leads us to repentance. So show them the love they’ve never experienced and the kindness they’ve never seen.

Yet do not merely do good deeds while refraining from preaching the gospel. There are some Christians that only show love but refuse to preach. “I preach by my works,” they’ll say. But one cannot believe unless they hear the gospel message. Even as it’s written,

> “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14)

If you truly love them, then you will share Christ with them. If they don’t believe, because you wouldn’t preach, then they’ll go to hell at your expense. Why should we treat a human soul like the dirt that passes through a gardener’s fingers? Love them with sincerity, and watch it change their life.

If you live out the life changing power of God’s love daily, it will transform your life. God will transform you through your obedience, and others will treat you with greater respect. Yes, some unbelievers will hate you, and some believers will argue with you. But a selfless person is repaid more frequently with selfless love by others than a selfish person. Take this to heart and change how you approach and treat others, and watch it change

your life. Though the fruit may not be immediately seen, if you apply this principle faithfully, then in years to come you will see the fruit of God's reward, a fruit that HE promises will bless you.

As it is written,

> "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." (Gal. 6:7–10)

Habit Two

Self-awareness

HOW CAN WE grow unless we pay attention to ourselves? How can we change for the better if we don't look at our own faults and seek to grow in them? We need God and must watch ourselves to see how we are not lining up with His heart.

We need to let go of our own life goals and embrace the better things that God has for us. If our goals line up with the heart and leading of Christ, then there is nothing wrong with them. But if we choose to follow our own hearts, then we're no different than the world.

We know that unbelievers want nothing to do with the Lord. If we try to lead our own lives rather than surrendering to the guidance of the Spirit, we are acting no different than the world. Jesus says that those born of the Spirit are like the wind. We must be willing to follow the blowing of God's wind and surrender to His will.

The reason why some Christian's struggle with this is because worldly doctrines have entered into the church. The world teaches that a person should follow their heart and pave their own path in life. But God has a plan for each of us, and we need to remember that we have an account to give to Him. The world has no fear of God and doesn't even begin to consider the account they need to give. So they live according to their own heart and claim that God has no real purpose in human life. When we make life about ourselves and our own ambitions while taking out the need to give an account to a higher authority, morality becomes a mere opinion. The need for God in

the American life could never be higher. Supposed “rights” trump morality, divorce rates are through the roof, and families are becoming increasingly broken. There are more single mothers now than ever.

Modern feminism tells these mothers that they don’t need a man and can do it themselves. In the end, they find life to be deeply burdening without a partner, and they secretly desire help with their children. Where unbelieving women felt socially trampled on, men are now taking that place. Those who follow a feminist doctrine of life act as if women are superior to men and yet call it equality. Thus in some relationships, the men are now oppressed.

Love has lost its commitment. Many men and women go from empty relationship to empty relationship having child after child with person after person. Children grow up together in broken homes with no father or different fathers. A woman can be told she doesn’t need a man, but you can’t look into the innocent face of a child and tell them they don’t need a loving father. These people need God, and we need to bring Him to them. We must be fervent in these things, and if we’re too busy building our own kingdoms, how can we further the Lord’s?

People are walking all over each other, but where there is love, there is morality and peace. The source of the problem is a secular doctrine of self-actualization to please oneself. People follow their heart, and if it doesn’t immediately benefit their joy, then there is no purpose for it—including relationships. It’s funny how Hollywood has such a profound impact on the life of Americans considering that many famous actors live broken, messed up lives. Just read it in the news! “So and so cheated and crushed their spouse’s heart.”

Is this the kind of life a person should aspire to have? With all its glitz and glamour, Hollywood would have you believe that their way of life is the only way to live. But money and fame don’t equal happiness; love does. It’s been a universal truth since the creation of time. Even as it is written,

> “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted calf with hatred.” (Prov. 15:17)

Solomon, who authored Proverbs, was exceedingly rich. He was among the richest men to have ever lived, even to this day. But with all his money and all his riches, he proclaimed that the only thing that can fill a man’s heart

is love.

Some Christians have forgotten these age-old truths and are being led astray by the popular doctrines of today. Doctrines that tell them to better themselves, set their own goals in life, go to college, and get a good job to make it through this life to the next. These teachings are really just self-actualization in a hidden package. While these things are important, how we go about them is even more important. God always knows what's best, and we should never cast off His guidance, voice, and wisdom. Remember that God has a plan for each of us, and we should never do anything without praying and being led by Him first. If we are going to call God our Lord, then we need to submit to His authority.

But there are doctrines that don't teach a person to submit to God's perfect plan. Rather, they teach one to live according to one's own wisdom. "God gave you a mind. So use it!" they proclaim. But remember that we need to love the Lord with all our mind as well, being fully submissive to Him. The reason why these issues exist is because the doctrines of the world have infiltrated the church. We must always remain self-aware to what we're believing and practicing. Are we allowing the world to influence us, our walks, and beliefs? Are we coming out from among them to be sanctified unto the Lord? How are we pleasing God in our conduct?

Those who live for themselves and attain all the money they want, find themselves broken and in need of something more. As a fire is never satisfied with fuel, so the heart of a man is never satisfied with his increase. But many would teach you to self-actualize without actually calling it self-actualization. If all a person tries to do is further their own kingdom, ambitions, goals, and peace, it will leave them broken and dry. Why? Because they're missing the one thing money can't buy—love.

So they live an extravagant life hoping to fill the hole in their heart, but in the end, it doesn't fill them. So what do they do? Ignore the hole and teach others to do likewise. However, ignoring the hole only results in collapse. Like a sinkhole under the foundation of a home, so everything falls apart. Their marriages collapse, their families break, and their homes fall apart. Every home must be supported on a firm foundation of love.

As we discussed in the last habit, this is what this world is missing. Love is the center of the meaning of life. Without love, life has no meaning.

In the 1800s people followed a personal “code” of honor so to speak. There was no literal code, but most of the people believed in a commitment to one another. Marriages lasted, and families respected each other. They had their problems, but they stuck together and worked through them. Marriage wasn’t a battle against one another but rather a battling together against the trials of life.

But in today’s generation, they teach that one should please themselves rather than be committed to another person. If a relationship doesn’t please them, then they believe that they need to move on. They live from one lustful, vain moment to another. People are more broken now than ever because they feel so unloved. No one is committed to them, because everyone around them is just trying to gratify themselves. If loving them doesn’t gratify another person, then no one will be committed to them. The world lives to gratify and satisfy their flesh and teaches those around them to do the same. Unfortunately, as these worldly doctrines have grown worse and worse, they have found their way into the church. Even so, there are some Christians who’d rather divorce than work their problems out. The two spouses struggle for control rather than giving that control to God to obey His plan for marriage outlined in the word.

In today’s generation, there are misconceptions about love. People expect love without having to give any. They expect to have the perfect life only to end up broken when they can’t have everything they want. They expect love to serve their purpose and bless their own heart. Then when it doesn’t, they end up broken.

It never occurs to some people that in order to be loved, first they must love. Also, love isn’t always convenient, and it isn’t always joyous. Consider that a loving mother would die to save her children. Putting yourself in the place of death is neither convenient nor joyous. Love is the action of drawing near and holding dear. Hatred is the action of pushing away and killing. Therefore those who gratify themselves hate everyone else who won’t please their flesh. Those who do this in the church are guilty of this sin.

Love, in nature, creates an overwhelming desire to make another person live and be happy. Self-love is about making ourselves happy. Real love is selfless and serves the other person first. If we love only ourselves, then we won’t care how we hurt others just as long as we can be happy. This isn’t

love at all.

We need to examine our own hearts to see if we've been loving the way we should. Do we cast off the needs of others? Do we merely show small acts of kindness, or do we try to fill the need? Do we fill the needs of friends but merely give a meal to a homeless brother who we don't know? Do we care if someone else is having a bad day? How do we go out of our way to comfort them and make their day better? Do we say, "I'll pray for you," then forget about it? Do we say, "God will take care of you," but forsake their needs? This happens more frequently than you think! Examine your own heart to see if you're perfectly filling the needs of others even when it's not convenient for you.

In the world's culture today, love has lost all its meaning. Where mothers would have died for their child, some mothers wouldn't hesitate to abort them. Why? Because having the child makes them unhappy in one way or another. Seeing that it doesn't gratify their desires, they feel as if they have the right to murder an innocent unborn life. "I can't afford the child, so I should have an abortion" becomes the thought process of some. But as we read, "better is a dinner of herbs where love is…."

"Having a child will keep me from my goals in life…," so they kill their baby. This is similar to the Scripture that says,

> "You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures." (James 4:2–3)

Some people introduce rape into the argument of abortion. Rape is a horrible, terrible, tremendous evil that should never happen to anyone. Not only does it deeply wound a woman's heart but it leads a wounded woman to kill an innocent child through her hatred for the evil man.

It's not her fault she's pregnant; she shouldn't be forced into it. It's true. But it also isn't the child's fault that the man was evil. When a woman is raped and gets pregnant, she feels as if a great evil is growing in her womb. She feels that the man who raped her doesn't deserve to be a father, and she's right about that. But if she feels that there is any good in her heart, then she needs to remember that the baby in her womb is half her and half him. Half

of the baby is from a rapist, and half of the baby is a good hearted person, that didn't deserve this great evil to happen to them.

Even so, the baby, like the mother, is an innocent bystander. It's a good hearted infant that didn't deserve this great evil. The baby didn't deserve for this to be the way that they'd be brought into this world.

So why should a person do more evil to this poor innocent baby by killing it? Those that commit crimes deserve judgment. But this baby hasn't committed a crime, just the man. Maybe seeing that she's the mother, then perhaps that child will more likely be a good hearted person like her. We should never let grief lead us to regrets. And to kill one's own unborn child is psychotic. Psychosis is a mental illness and not a concept for arguing national rights or the lack of them.

So as we know, this world never preaches true love. It teaches us to chase after our own hearts without regard for others. When our hearts lead us, it takes over our being and leads us down roads of regret. No matter how you follow your own heart, if you do it, you'll regret it one day. Whether in this life when God disciplines you or in the next when He judges you, you'll regret it. These subtle teachings in the church come from the extreme evil of the world. When people follow their own hearts, their actions are murder toward others. While not literally murder in every action, the word of God tells us that if anyone doesn't love their brother, then they hate them. If you don't fill someone else's needs, if you never comfort a broken person, but are only mindful of your own needs and your own life, then you are hating those around you by action. And as we read,

> "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also." (1 John 4:20–21)

This is why we also read,

> "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up

> his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." (1 John 3:16–18)

So ask yourself how you've been laying down your own life for others recently. How have you been putting them first? We should always be self-aware of our own doings and try to grow in them. Are we only interested in sharing our own heart, or do we take the time to let the other person speak first, cherish their hearts by absorbing their words, then respond with an informed reply having taken the time to hear the other person out? Even in the little things, we should love. But we should especially be loving in the big things, cherishing everyone in the church whether we know them or not.

But the subtle teachings of self-love have made their way into the church. Those who believe such things will make it sound as if it's okay to look out for your own interests and ignore the other person if it means you'll suffer. As some would say, "You can't love until you can love yourself." How selfish! We are commanded by God to lay down our lives for one another. But if we are going to lay down our lives for others, then by nature, it suggests that we will suffer for one another to take care of each other. If we don't take care of one another, then by action, we're hating. There is no grey area; we either love or we hate. Remember that love fulfills the law, so if we are going try to be perfect in anything, it should be how we love each other. So because the world's self-love has entered the church, we need to judge between the two to determine if we're loving according to God's heart.

True love creates a foundation for morality and goodness. The reason why this world is broken is because it needs real and sincere love. Yet people are taught to seek their own and that the road to happiness is about following your heart and pleasing yourself. We know the atrocities of the world's doctrine, yet it still finds a way into the Christian life. Examine your own heart to see how you have or haven't been conforming to Christ, and be diligent to persist in the heart and plan of Jesus.

But sometimes when we try to be better people, we forget to let the Lord govern our hearts and lives. We go to church on Sunday but get tempted into becoming man-pleasers at work with the hope of benefiting ourselves through it. We go to college without asking God's plan for our lives. Some Christians would rather go on vacation than use their money to help a brother

in need. Love is slipping out of the hearts of some believers because they haven't taken the need for self-awareness seriously.

We need to watch the state of our hearts while comparing them to God's. We need to remember to be like Jesus through being led by His Spirit. We need to examine our hearts and our lives to determine if we are on God's course of life or our own.

The world seeks to "self-actualize" merely for the purpose of financial or personal gain while leaving morality and selflessness on the wayside. Yes, a worldly person may seek to be a good person, but their main focus in life is on how they can bless themselves before they consider how they can bless others. This philosophy tends to enter the church and find itself in the lives of believers. Believers seek to live comfortable lives. Maybe not wealthy lives but comfortable lives with no worry. They get tempted without realizing it to have that good career or make that good investment to live more comfortably but lay God's plan for them on the wayside.

Then, in their complacency, the fire for God that they once had slowly fizzles out, and they don't know why. But the real reason is that they were taught bad doctrine, which was mingled with worldly traditions. As we read,

> "And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." (1 Peter 1:17–19)

Our unsaved parents or grandparents taught us to live a comfortable life by getting good grades, going to college, and getting that good job. Then if you think for a moment that you want to follow the Lord's heart, they'll say to you, "Why wouldn't God have you go to college or get that good job?" Why ask yourself what God would do? Just ask the Lord and let Him govern your life. He doesn't call any of us to live a nasty poster child life. There are many that He'd call to college. But the real problem is whether or not we are submitting these things to God to live for His plan of redemption or if we're living for our own plan of comfort, which we devise through human wisdom.

Live according to God's wisdom and not your own. As it is written,

> "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths." (Proverbs 3:5–6)

Believe the word and follow it. He will show you His plan for you; only remember to pray before you do anything that He can lead you. By this you can examine your own heart to determine whether you're following God and listening to His voice or your own heart. But that we should pray before anything is evident. As we read,

> "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6–7)

And that we should be led by God is obvious because the word tells us that the sons of God are led by His Spirit. As we also read,

> "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." (Romans 8:14)

We should always examine ourselves to see if we are staying on God's course or straying from it. But the first thing we need to do is define God's course through hearing from the Holy Spirit and being led by Him. God reveals His general plan through the Scriptures. Then the Spirit shows us how the Scriptures apply to our lives on a moment by moment basis as He speaks to us throughout the day. Therefore we must be sensitive to His voice.

Yet through improper doctrine, there are some who'd change God's plan for you through their own private interpretation of the Scriptures. Therefore learn the Holy Spirit's voice and submit to it. God's individual plan for your life is defined by His leading and established through a perfect understanding of the Scriptures. If your understanding of the Scriptures is not yet perfect, then you should *ALWAYS* be studying your Bible until it is. So seeing that no one has perfect knowledge, then everyone should be pressing forward to advance their knowledge of God and grow thereby. As we read,

> “as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby,” (1 Peter 2:2)

Examine your own heart, and determine if you have been doing this as you should. If not, then be diligent to dive into God’s word every day for as long as you can. Don’t spend merely twenty minutes a day, as the meaning of the chapter doesn’t always absorb in such a short timeframe. Devote as much time as you can afford that you can truly draw nearer to the Lord. Then, by knowing the Scriptures, you can test the words of others to know what you’re being fed. If others are trying to lead you to their heart or your heart rather than God’s, you, by a clear understanding of the Scriptures, will be able to discern this. In the book of Acts, the Bereans tested the words of the Apostle Paul, and Paul wholeheartedly welcomed it. For he knew that he spoke truth and if anyone came to know the word, they’d see he was indeed pointing them to God.

Therefore come to understand God’s doctrine and live according to it. Abstain from men’s doctrines and the doctrines of churches, and learn the Lord’s to live by it. For even Jesus said,

> “Jesus answered them and said, ‘My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority. He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him.’” (John 7:16–18)

If we develop our own opinions about His word, we’re really living for ourselves and not for God. God only meant His word one way when He spoke it. Therefore we should submit to that one truth and live according to it.

Acts reflected upon the Bereans as if they were of the noblest character for lining all things up with the word of God. Therefore have a most noble character by submitting to God’s word both that which is written and that which is orally spoken to you through the Holy Spirit. Examine yourself, and determine how you are or aren’t conforming to it.

If “actualization” has a place, it should begin with the self-awareness of

the heart. Not that we should please our own hearts but that we should consider others' hearts around us, being self-aware to how we're treating them and thinking of them. We should examine our hearts and compare them to Christ's. We must keep an awake and aware mind to God's plan and keep a fire to fulfill it.

Remember that God created you for a purpose. Your purpose is to fit into His plan of redemption. He wants to use you to change the lives of those around you. He is trying to convey them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. He wants to use you as His tool for that.

Whether you seek to be rich or are just trying to make it through day to day, if you live to make it through this life, you'll forget God's purpose for your life. You'll be so focused on the here and now that you'll forget the reason He created you. God made you and called you by name. He loved you and gave you your life.

Don't live for this present life, but live and dwell in the ever present Spirit. God has a mission for you, and when you remember to live for it and to be passionate for that mission, it changes your life. As you surrender to God's purpose for you and live out His mission every moment of the day, Jesus changes your life. Remember that He said, "Behold I create all things new!" Even so, God will create a continual newness of life in you by changing your heart day after day as you grow in Him.

I can never emphasize enough that you must live for His mission. If you don't know what it is, then call on Him day and night, and pray without ceasing until He answers you. It took me nearly five years of praying and pursuing the Lord day in and day out just to begin to understand His ultimate plan for my life.

When you live for His plan and fulfill that mission He has for you, it refreshes you and fills you with a newness daily. If you truly love the Lord, be established not only in His grace but also in His plan. Seek it, and live it out.

Watch yourself, and be self-aware to your actions. Test your heart and your actions, and watch yourself constantly to discern whether you're living for the here and now or for God's daily plan. Not just an ultimate plan but the daily things He requires of you being your Master. Remember that you are His servant, and as His servant, He has daily duties for you to complete. Not

just what you read in the Bible but things the Holy Spirit will share with you personally as He explains to you how to fulfill the Scriptures on a moment by moment basis. If you slip off course and live for the present life, then repent and keep focusing on His daily and ultimate mission for you. Be mission minded. God has a daily purpose for you. Live it out, and be fervent for it. It will transform your life as God transforms your heart each day.

Just because you love the Lord and just because you seek Him, go to Bible study, and go to church every Sunday doesn't mean you haven't slipped off the path of His plan. You may be caught up with taking care of children, working a job, attending school, or any other activity of life. Then, by the natural progression of life, it is easy to forget to live out that daily mission He gave you.

While you seek to live for Him daily, you may have forgotten that you need to focus on the purpose of your life. Don't focus on living your life but on the purpose of it that you may honor the Lord with it. Stay self-aware to this fact, and test yourself to see whether or not you've been continuing down this course. If you haven't, then repent and turn back around. Live for God by honoring Him in your purpose of life.

When you establish Christ as the leader of your purpose, then He changes you constantly, daily. Not only as you grow in the word but as you grow in the Holy Spirit through following Him and learning His voice.

Then, as you follow the Spirit, you'll grow in the depths of love, becoming by nature a more compassionate person. Love fulfills the law, and by love we are justified.

If we don't pay attention to our course in life but dwell in the present while trying to live for God, we'll lose our passion. Although we're trying to live for God, we're forgetting to actually live for His plan that He created for us. If we don't live for His plan, then we're really living for ourselves while trying to honor God at the same time.

Though we aren't trying to dishonor Him, our actions are doing so unless we choose to submit to the purpose He has for us. Remember that to submit to His purpose is to obey Him. How are we found righteous? Not only through believing God but through obeying Him.

There are times that we think we're living for God, but in truth, we are focused more on our day-to-day activities. We give this life more attention

than Him and worry about what we're doing, where we're going in life, or what needs to be done in the present. Then, in our ever busy lives, we forget that our life exists not for our own little kingdom that we're trying to build but for God's kingdom. Rather than being builders of His kingdom as we should, we end up more focused on our own as we're trying to build our own life. Lay down the tools, and stop building your life. Be established in Christ, and let Him build you as His Holy Spirit leads you. Although you really have wanted to honor and love the Lord, you are not doing so if you forgot that this world is not your home. Remember that we are pilgrims who do not inherit this present world.

Why build up a comfortable life in this world when God is going to destroy all these things and give us peace in the next? This world is a dreadful evil that God is going to melt in fire. Even as we read,

> "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Pet. 3:10–13)

Remember that you are not of this world, nor is your life wrapped up in this life. Your life is for the next world, where God will dwell in the New Jerusalem. You are called to live not in this present life but daily for Christ through His leading by meditating on His Spirit. You are called to examine your heart daily to see if you're taking your steps according to Christ's leading or your own heart.

Beloved, consider yourself. What manner of person have you been up to this point? Have you been living for God's mission? Now, we're not talking about the main plan of redemption but His specific plan for your life and your life alone. The one He created for you and only you. Have you been living for this? If not, then change your heart! Remember that this world is evil and

God will destroy it. Remember that you are not a part of it but have been set apart and sanctified in His Spirit, by His blood, and in His love.

Focus not only on your relationship with Him but also on His plan for you. Learn to be led by Him, and listen to His voice. You are led by Him when you hear His voice and obey it. If you do anything else, then you're not being led by Him.

If you're not being led by Him but living in this present life, then you'll likely lose your fire through time. Although you'll love the Lord, that fire that was once ignited will fizzle. God commands that we should not quench the Spirit but rather foster the flame. Jesus doesn't put out even a smoldering flax but seeks to make it an all-consuming fire again. Let God light a fire in you and rekindle the flame of your heart. Be refreshed in Him and established in His Holy Spirit.

Many struggle with understanding the difference between living for this life and living in this present life. If you're living for this life, then you're being like the world and living for this world. But if you live in the present life, you are trying to love the Lord but forgetting to live for His daily mission He has for you. You're forgetting to live with your mind on the next life, keeping in mind that this life is a pilgrimage. When you forget these things, you get caught up in the duties of this life: taking care of the kids, feeding them, clothing them, working your job and getting quality out, playing that game, doing the dishes. If you focus on all the activities of the day but forget to meditate on the Holy Spirit, you're neglecting your relationship with Him. Yes, you may be growing in the word, but you're not growing in the Spirit and nearness to Him by ignoring His presence. It can be difficult at first to meditate on Him while doing other needful things, but if you remember to have faith, He'll be your strength, and all things will be possible for you through Christ Jesus who strengthens you. But by living for the here and now, you're forgetting to take your place in the body and to fulfill your function. What you do at church isn't your function. What you do every idle moment of your life and everything in between is your function in Christ.

If you live in the present life focusing on the busy-ness of it, you'll be increasingly but slowly worn down day after day. The mundane details of life will dry you out, and it will become harder to be a light through the process

of time. But if we abide in His course He has plotted, then His continual infilling of strength, love, and joy will come naturally.

Remember that we are called to abide in the path of Christ along the narrow way. Now, the narrow way is more than doing the Christian things of going to church, Bible study, and Bible college; reading the word; and having devotions. The narrow way is found in the Spirit as He leads us along the daily path of Christ. How can we be refreshed if we're focusing harder on what we're doing than on the presence of the Spirit? We are not called to work in and of ourselves but to rest in the Spirit as He works through us. For the narrow way is walking in His love through following the Spirit's voice, by which we are established in His works.

His works can only be established through the leading of the Spirit. God tells us what He wants of us, and we are called to believe Him and obey. Yet we can't know the things He calls us to do unless we seek Him for them and continue in self-awareness to our path. Are we focusing too hard on the Christian things of the here and now? Or are we taking it to heart to focus on the Holy Spirit and obey His voice? If we make our relationship with the Lord about what we're doing for Him, then we're forgetting grace. Having the mindset that we need to study hard, go to church every Sunday, and read our Bibles while forgetting to be led by and rest daily in the Holy Spirit is a works mentality in a hidden package.

Although we want to honor the Lord with what we do, we forget to let Him work through us. If we're too focused on doing the Christian thing and trying to make God happy, we're forgetting the need for the Spirit to operate through us. He doesn't just operate whenever we try to do the right thing. He operates when we hear His voice and obey it. We are saved by faith and obedience to it, not our own works. While we must work, the working we must do is that of faith, not legalism or flesh. It isn't about what we try to do to make the Lord happy. It's about Him being pleased. How is He pleased? When we obey Him. So the only works required of us are those of *obedience* to the Holy Spirit. How has the Spirit ever led a man wrong? How has His will or leading been anything less than perfect? How has His word ever contradicted the Scriptures? Remember that it was He who wrote the word through men.

While the Bible is our foundation, there is more than this that God

wants to share with us. He wants to share His heart in the deepest sense and interpret His Bible through the Spirit, whom He gave us as a deposit.

How does the Holy Spirit guarantee our salvation? Just merely having Him isn't that guarantee. His leading guarantees it as He fulfills righteousness through us. As we obey His conviction and leading, we, by nature, fulfill all the things that please the Lord.

So we need to learn to hear God more clearly in our lives. We can't hear Him if we aren't continually living for His will and pursuing His heart. Remember that God praised David before he was called to be king. While he yet tended sheep, the Lord said of David that he was a "man after God's own heart." We likewise need to be after the Lord's heart daily. Not just the ultimate plan but in all things both great and small. And how can we know His heart unless He shares it with us daily? How can He share it if we can't hear Him? How can a servant obey unless he understands his Lord and Master's daily commands for him? How can we understand unless we know, hear, and can fully discern the voice of the Spirit?

You can discern God's voice always. There is never a time when you won't understand Him if you search hard enough for that understanding. While it may be difficult at first, if you are diligent to seek His word and understand it, the Lord will see your heart for Him, and He'll reveal His heart to you.

Led to a Greater Purpose

If we're not constantly listening to the Spirit's voice every moment of the day and obeying Him, then we are not being led. While we may be led in the larger things of life from time to time, if we focus on our own works while living in the moment, we're forgetting to be led in the little things. We need to live for God in the moment and not live for the moment itself. Too many people are focused on their own little worlds and kingdoms they're building and need to live a life fully surrendered to Christ's purpose.

We shouldn't only be found listening to God's voice in merely the biggest things. We should also be found faithfully listening to Him in everything, always desiring to hear His heart and please Him through obedience. Now remember that he who is trustworthy with a little is trustworthy with much. Knowing this, be found faithful in the little things, for

they add up to the bigger.

It's much like the profit of a casino. Most casinos make all their money from slot machines. One coin at a time, little after little, they rake in a fortune in the end. Likewise, the little things of Christ rake in a great treasure in the heavenly places for you because those who were trustworthy with a little are given much more due to faithfulness. Even as it is written,

> "Then came the first, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned ten minas.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned five minas.' Likewise he said to him, 'You also be over five cities.'" (Luke 19:16–19)

Knowing this, why do we only try to be faithful with the big things and seem to think God doesn't care about the little in between? The little things have always mattered. For we know that a little sin is all it takes to separate a man from Christ, for which reason we all need a Savior. If then a little sin can amount to much, why wouldn't we think that a little righteousness wouldn't add up to the greater things?

If you followed a guide through a thick jungle forest, what would happen to you if you waited idly by to only follow him in the bigger things? You'd be lost in the foliage no doubt. But just as one needs to follow a guide closely with each step through a dense jungle, even so we need each of our steps to be established in Christ—both in the big steps and in the small ones.

Consider that we can walk a long distance through the process of time. But this distance is not determined by the greater measure (let's say a mile or more). But that mile is measured a few feet at a time as we put one foot in front of the other. If we miss a single step, we'll stumble. Even so, those who don't follow God in their little steps daily are stumbling in their walks and may not even know it.

God calls us to be faithful and founded in His love. If we love Him, then we will want to live for His plan while loving each other. But if we live in this present life, we can get burdened and choked by the cares of this life. Then when we're choked by this life, we'll grow a little more selfish every day. Why? Because as we slowly become concerned with our own affairs,

we'll pursue those things that provide for us and benefit us. Then if anything tampers with that peace, rather than giving to another out of faith because God tells us to, we'll question that God is even speaking and hoard what we have left. We shouldn't seek to provide for ourselves but should let the Lord provide as we walk by faith. Even as it is written,

> "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matt. 6:24–34)

Don't worry about your needs. Follow God, and He will lead you to the things that will fill them in due and proper time. Though you may suffer for a season every once and a while, God is testing your faith. Will you falter and walk by sight, or will you trust that He loves you and will provide for you?

If we focus on our own needs, it leads us to a selfish heart. We'll forsake the needs of others to take care of ourselves. How is this loving at all? God calls us to faith and love. Indeed, our faith must work through love,

and if we believe that God will provide, then why do we fear making sacrifices to relieve a burdened soul?

Harvesting a Better Life in Christ

If we have a selfish heart, it will affect our lives and the lives of those around us in terrible ways. Beginning with those closest to you and moving outward to everyone else around you, you'll leave behind a trail of hurt. Think of it like a pebble thrown in still water. After the stone is thrown, there is a ripple that goes continuously outward. Even so, our decisions and actions affect others' lives, creating a cycle of negativity. If we act negatively toward others, they may go and do likewise to hurt others as well. But if we bless another, they may be inspired to bless others around them, thus creating a ripple of love, peace, and goodness, which leads us to one fundamental truth of life written in the Bible:

> "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." (Gal. 6:7)

If we sow love, we will reap it. Likewise, if we don't relieve , through the love of Christ, those that suffer, we'll reap suffering for ourselves, whether by the hand of God or by those whom we've insulted through the course of time. But by taking it to heart to walk by faith and follow through with love, others will think more highly of us. God's hand will bless us according to His promises because we faithfully obey conviction and love one another. By sowing love in everyone around us, we'll reap better lives both in this life and in the next.

Now, there are three grounds for sowing: ourselves, the hearts of those around us, and God. We are called to sow in all three of these without leaving the others undone. If we only sow to self, we'll reap horrible relationships and a need for God's healing. If we sow in others but forsake our own needs for personal growth, we'll become nothing but hypocrites. If we sow to God without regard for others, then we *are* hypocrites, not practicing what we believe: that people ought to show mercy and loving-kindness toward one another. If we sow to God and neglect the need for personal growth, the idea of God becomes a meaningless religion rather than an impactful, life changing, heartfelt relationship. Thus God exhorts us,

> "Sow for yourselves righteousness; Reap in mercy; Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD, Till He comes and rains righteousness on you." (Hos. 10:12)

The fallow ground in this case is your own heart. Righteousness begins with the state of the heart toward God then proceeds with the proper response of faith. But if we sow in God or any of these three grounds unevenly, we'll reap an uneven harvest. Eating the fruits of an even harvest leads to a happy, fattened heart. Eating an uneven harvest makes a heart weak and starving for love.

We need to be faithfully committed to God, others, and our personal growth in Christ. If we sow sparingly in others, our relationships will show it. Remember that if you want friends, first you must be friendly. Everyone is near to a giver, not a scrooge. People cherish those who love them. If then you want to be cherished, first learn to cherish others. But that we reap sparingly if we sow sparingly is evident! As we also read,

> "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." (2 Cor. 9:6)

Consider another person's heart to be like fertile ground. How you sow in them will determine how they'll respond to you. This is a fundamental truth for everyone, including children. If you want to have the greatest impact on your children, then examine yourself and consider what seeds you may be sowing in them.

Many parents deal harshly with their children due to frustration. Sometimes children don't listen, and anyone who has a teenager knows that! A man I once knew jokingly said, "You think the terrible twos are bad? Wait until they're in their terrible teens!"

When a child becomes a teen, they may grow mentally, but are still learning to grow emotionally. A parent ought to be sensitive to this fact and willfully explain their logic and reasoning to their children. Their child's ever inquisitive mind seeks to understand the world around them. Every child has a "why" stage. When they grow mentally as a toddler, they begin to seek the meaning of everything around them and ask, "Why does this happen? Why does that happen?" Then, as teenagers, they ask, "*Why* should I!?" Oh how

poetic when they come up with that phrase: “Why should I?”

Parent: “Go clean your room.”

Enter Shakespeare: “Why…should I?”

But this fiery rebellion can be quenched with a fire hydrant burst of love. Yes, they should be disciplined for disrespect, but the ultimate solution comes from a parent’s love.

A teenage mind grows, and he desires to know more. However, their emotions are still developing, and they’re learning how to properly use and handle them. In this, they grow easily frustrated and merely need a loving parent who willingly suffers long with them to kindly explain themselves. Help them understand your logic. Don’t get angry with them and fight but, through love, convict them.

A parent doesn’t need to ever give an account to their child at any time. The parent is the authority, not the child. But by explaining ourselves, we aren’t giving an account to them. We are helping them understand what they don’t understand. Somewhere between being a child and becoming a teen, they no longer accept “Do it because I told you.”

In our frustration, we may tell them to just listen, but we should be willing to explain our logic and teach it to them. We shouldn’t expect them to have our logic unless they’ve learned it from us. Common sense doesn’t come to a child through osmosis. Being around a sensible parent doesn’t help them. We need to train a child lovingly in the faith that they may understand how to walk in the love of Christ and the wisdom of God as they ought. Now, a rebellious child should be met with discipline, but we shouldn’t forsake helping them grow mentally and emotionally.

They want to know your logic because they’re growing an adult mind like yours. So help them make the mental transition from child to adult. Don’t talk down to them like a little child, as if to be demeaning, but lovingly help them. Train them in common sense, and they’ll have it. By this, they’ll feel more respected.

Remember that you reap what you sow. If you want a loving, respectful child, then sow the same in them. Most of all, I can never stress enough the need to become your child’s friend. Be self-aware to the seeds you’re planting, and sow love in them rather than bitterness. Don’t respond abrasively to an irrational teen. Be patient that they can see you’re bigger

than them and deserving of respect. Sow love, and through time, you'll reap it.

This love will last until you die, and that child will most likely take care of you when you're too old to work. Whether you realize it now or not, your children are your retirement plan. How often have you seen an old mother too old and weak to take care of herself being cared for by her children? How often have you seen the son or son-in-law help the old man mow the lawn? When you're old, they'll take care of you and repay you for all the ways you've taken care of them. Sow in them deeply, and one day you'll see a deep reward, both in this life and in the next.

When a child feels deeply loved and wanted by their parents, they respect them more. If you help them grow mentally, they'll think of you as a soundly wise person. If they respect you and think you're intelligent and logical, they will be more likely to listen to you. This is how they view their friends. They trust them because of a bond, and they agree with their logic.

The things their friends say make sense to them. If you take the time to nurture their minds, they will see how wise you are and listen to you instead. Granted, there is much more to parenting than this, but many people forget this important aspect.

So long as the kids are fed and listen is all that seems to matter to some parents. But we need to remember that not all mental growth occurs in school. They gain knowledge at school but learn wisdom from you. Knowledge is merely stored information, whereas wisdom is the ability to accurately apply that knowledge. Show them how to use common sense, and they'll have it. You can't expect children to just figure it out. You have to lovingly guide them to it.

But unfortunately, there are many in the world that have forsaken the value of family–friendship. They only seek to benefit themselves and leave each member on the wayside. This worldly way of life has entered some Christian families and is affecting the church overall.

Love is the core of family. When the core of a person's family is shattered, it leaves the individual members dry, in need of love, and searching for meaning. It is a true statement that if the core of a family is broken, it can lead a person to live a shattered life. Those who lead shattered lives have broken processes of thought, both of heart and of mind.

Not that they intend to, but due to the influences they succumb to, it changes their thinking, views, and overall outlook on life. Such a person can go on to hurt and influence others to have negative processes of thought; beginning with those they're closest to, then moving continuously outward like a pebble in a pond. Through their broken opinions and outlook on life, they perpetuate the cycle of negativity by influencing others to have the same. Now, it's not that a person who comes from a broken family will always be shattered or broken. A fundamental truth is that "Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you take it."

A person is in charge of their own outcome in life. God gave us free will to use it, not to abuse it. Our free will should be used to do good, but succumbing to the temptation of negativity only creates a bitter heart. Remember that bitter water comes from a bitter opening. Even so, a person that has a bitter heart is known by the way they treat others.

Free will can be abused like this and in other ways as well. Some use their free will to serve only themselves while hurting others along the way. Or they freely seek to benefit themselves, refuse God's leading, and teach other Christians to do the same. But there are others that use their free will to make the most of life through making the most of loving God and others.

Just because something horrible happened to you doesn't mean it needs to ruin or control your life. You're in charge of your own opinions and outlook on life. Rather than unfavorable circumstances forcibly corrupting your peace, you can control your inward response to the negative stimulus.

Sometimes the most negative responses come from a lack of understanding. We seek to understand the reason for the negativities and trials of life, and when we can't find the truthful reasons, we come up with irrational and emotionally negative responses. I once knew a sincere Christian man who lost His daughter. His response? He couldn't understand why she died, so he chose to be mad at God and the world.

I once knew another man who lost his son to a drunk driver. The drunk driver was also a young man like his son. After he was imprisoned, rather than the father being angry with God or that man, he chose to love that young man. Both he and his wife would frequently visit him, sharing with him how much they forgave him and loved him.

This type of love shattered the young man's entire perception of life and

forgiveness. Here he couldn't forgive himself, hardly knowing the person he killed, while the parents of the person he killed forgave him immediately and wouldn't stop loving him.

This truly is the heart and center of God's love. God sent His only Son to die because of our mistakes, to forgive us, and to seek a relationship with us. Due to the parents' response to be filled with faith when they did not understand the circumstances and to instead choose to pour love on the unlovable, it saved another's soul.

They heartily received this young man as their own child, even as God willfully accepts us as His. If the parents chose to respond with a bitter heart, the young man would have most likely succumbed to his grief and taken his own life.

How important are people to you? This young man's situation wasn't due to willful murder but a stupid decision to drink and drive—a decision that led to a car accident. And a car accident is just that—an accident that no one intended to have happen. Though he didn't mean to kill, he disregarded life by choosing to drive drunk, probably figuring that something as terrible as that would never happen to him. Yes, he disregarded life by a foolish decision, but he never wanted to hurt anyone. His heart was swallowed by sorrow, and he desired suicide.

Rather than creating another tragedy by allowing this young man to lose his life due to their tragedy, the parents sought to save him through love. Some may feel enraged by the thought of saving such a person. "If it were my child, I wouldn't speak to him! I wouldn't even look at him!" Some in the world would be so bold as to say, "Let him kill himself. He took a life; he deserves to die!"

But why should this young man die? Who are we to determine who should live and who shouldn't? The world says, "Evil people shouldn't live!" But God is so pure that we're all evil to Him and yet He gives us the hope of life through love. If the heart can be changed, then the "deserved death" is no longer deserved.

Even so, as Christ transforms our hearts, it changes our lives forever. We should follow the example of Christ and do the same with everyone around us, including those who grieve us.

Taking Our Walks Seriously

Our judgment against another person's life is completely polarized in thinking. If we condemn another, then we're acting as if a sinner can't grow beyond their own evils to obtain a pure heart in Christ. How then can we grow beyond our own borders if we don't believe anyone else can? If you feel that young man shouldn't have been repaid with kindness, then consider your own mistakes.

You don't deserve God's unconditional love, but He gives it to you anyway to save you, cherish you, and redeem you, even though His Son had to die because of *your* sin. If He didn't die, then you'd never have any hope to be saved from eternal judgment and hell. It is NOT God's desire to send men to hell; hence He died to save you.

Jesus, as a perfectly just judge, will rid the world of evil and bless the good. If we are the center of that evil, with no regard for the Highest Authority or love for others, what then is left for us? We must love God, follow His Spirit, live daily for His purpose, and love one another, even those who grieve us. But that Jesus doesn't want to condemn men is evident. For He said that He will judge thus:

> "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matt. 25:41–46)

The eternal fire was prepared for the devil and his angels, not humanity. We only end up there due to a callous disregard for love and life, as Jesus goes on to say. If our hearts are changed by the love of God, it transforms us

to love like Him. Now, some may argue, “I don’t have to worry about this judgment; I have God’s grace!” But is grace an excuse to refuse to do good? If Jesus Himself says, “‘Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment…” then we need to take it to heart. We should have more fear for the Lord than that. God gives us grace but calls us to loving obedience as well.

Yet some others may say, “I do love my brethren! I go on missions trips and help the poor!” But there are many Christians that do this then neglect the brother that lives next door. First we need to have an in-reach touching the hearts of those nearest to us, and then we should have an outreach. Be stabilized in the love of God and bless one another with fervent love.

Every Christian knows this, but not everyone practices it as they ought! If indeed we seek the transformation His love brings, then we ought to practice it in our own lives. We should take care of all the brethren and especially repay with love those who have hurt or hate us. We don’t need to be a product of bitterness manufactured through someone else’s callous disregard for our lives. We have free will and can choose kindness over bitterness, saving our enemy and making a brother out of them instead.

But to many in the world, God’s love is vanity and useless. They cast off the need for Him, proclaiming that they can achieve all they want and desire in life without Him. Then they exhort you to do the same, and some Christians are falling for these bad doctrines in hidden packages. While the believers retain God in their thoughts, they forsake His plan for them and follow their own heart. They go to Bible study, they worship on Sunday, but they do everything they can to further themselves rather than seeking to further the kingdom. They don’t focus on the Holy Spirit throughout the day to listen to Him as they should. Rather, they go about their day and try to practice their Bibles without the direction of the Spirit. It’s as if they’ve forgotten to be intimate with their First Love.

But because they aren’t sensitive to God’s leading, they lead their own lives. If a door opens, they assume it’s God without asking Him. Then their lives become more about how they can have peace and enjoy their present life rather than stepping out to obey the Holy Spirit in all things.

Is life merely about achievement? If we should achieve anything, we

should become lovingly moral and soundly wise people. Such people that only pursue selfish gain forget that life has its end. Indeed, you don't need God to become rich, famous, or powerful. Anyone can do that! But what you do with your life after you die is determined by the decisions you make now, as you know.

Think of it in terms of retirement. Everyone focuses hard on saving for retirement for 30, 40, or even 50 years only to retire for 10–15 years before dying. If you ask a person, "What will happen to you when you retire?" those that have faithfully saved reply, "Have a better life!" But when asking the unsaved, "What will you do when you die? Do you know where you're going?" they reply, "I'll worry about it when I get there." But those that are saved through faith say, "I'll have a better life!" What do the Christians that follow their own heart say? "I trust in God's grace." Yet these are words without knowledge.

Those that are faithful know where they're going and have confidence. Those that are not are no different from the world, because they act like the world and love like the world. They don't have the inner peace from God in knowing where they're going, so they say, "I believe that God has grace." But he who has been faithful knows in his heart where he'll be when he dies because the Spirit testifies to his heart, "You'll have a better life." If you don't hear the Holy Spirit testifying, then search yourself to see if you've been walking with Him and following Him as you should. Get back in gear with the Spirit, walk in love, and obey God's voice. You'll have perfect peace by establishing your plans in Christ.

Now, retirement is only for a few years, but the place of death is for eternity. We generally spend more time saving for retirement than the time we spend being retired. We dedicate our whole lives for a short (although important) blip of life. How much more so should we also consider the value of where we'll be for eternity?

If you don't save for retirement, your life will be a nightmare. If you save, then you'll be saved from the trials that would have ensued during your old age had you not. If we consider the wisdom of saving for when we're weak and frail, why don't some Christians consider the wisdom of being reassured that they'll be saved when they die? God's judgment isn't merely for the most horrible people. God is so pure that one sin is an abomination to

Him. But after having come to Christ, some forget this important fact and justify following their own heart, one little step at a time, until they're walking entirely in the wrong direction.

We read that Adam and Eve committed one sin, which resulted in death and judgment. It was one little sin that didn't really hurt anybody for the moment. Not a series of sins, but one little sin.

If we live even for one little sin and try to justify it, there is no justification for it. Jesus came to remove sin and condemn it in the flesh, not justify it. He doesn't justify sin but the repentant person that loves Him and lives for Him.

Going to church and Bible study isn't living for Him. It's what we preach to an unbeliever, but somewhere some Christians forget this and make their relationship with God to be about church and their Bible. They forget to also stay intimate with the Holy Spirit, whom God gave them.

So church and Bible studies are nothing. Walking in the Spirit is everything. While the former is important, if we don't establish a daily walk in the Spirit, then we're practicing worthless and dry religion. For by the Spirit we know how to rightly apply the Bible we read. But without Him we have nothing, for He is our deposit. We can't live for Him unless we refuse our own hearts. To live for one's own heart is sin. When we come to Christ, we're sold out for Him and on fire. Then some believers, through the process of time, get caught up with the cares of their life and lose the fire. This is sin, and we are called to a lifetime of repentance and reverence. True repentance suggests that we will wholeheartedly accept the need for change and pursue it. It isn't a onetime thing; it's a forever thing.

We knew that going to church and Bible studies never satisfied God before, so why would it now? We know we need a personal relationship with Him. So why aren't we keeping it personal with His Spirit? We need to be self-aware to this and always examining our hearts. If we aren't keeping it personal, then we need to turn around, repent, and reignite the fire.

We need to be wholly devoted to the Lord and His Spirit at all times. We must let Him govern our lives while seeking to walk in His love and be led in His Spirit. He is our Lord and Master. We should use our free will to let Him be Lord. In this, love is perfected when we freely choose to let God govern the course of our lives and lovingly obey Him with a sincere heart.

He loved you and deserves your commitment to Him. Therefore we should take a relationship with Him seriously and grow in it constantly. Do not invest in this present life, but invest in the next with Christ.

Think about it! We spend more time being dead than being alive. Young men who died in the Vietnam War have now been dead longer than they were alive. Consider also something more recent. The young men who died in Desert Storm have been dead longer than they were alive.

But people don't take it to heart that the place of death is eternal and this life has its end. Even some Christians don't take it to heart. They have both eyes on the here and now and forget to have one eye on tomorrow in heaven. By keeping one eye ahead and one on the here and now, it helps remind us that we're on a pilgrimage. When we die, we transition from one plane of life to the next. Where you desire to transition to is up to you. You have the authority to determine it according to how you choose to walk in Christ and whether or not you choose to love God in truth.

But stop fighting for this life and trying to make it through. Stop trying to further yourself and lead a comfortable life. Be zealous for God, and let His love consume you. Don't let the world influence you to act like it, but listen to the Spirit's conviction and live wholeheartedly for Christ.

Too many people are focused on this life and the successes and failures of it. Christians get snagged by the pleasures, principles, or priorities of this life while forgetting to make the next life the greater priority. They try so hard to provide for their families and themselves that they forget that God must come first, always, in everything. Whether you're rich, poor, successful, happy, or broken in this life makes no difference after you're buried.

Yes, we should enjoy the blessings and gifts of God in this life, but to disregard the need for a mindset on the next is foolish. Don't try to be comfortable and happy; just serve the Lord. His joy will come naturally, and whether you were happy or broken in this life makes no difference when you're dead. When you're dead you're dead, and all the things of this life are behind you.

How you chose to live and whether or not you had a real and serious relationship with God will determine what lies ahead of you.

Due Reverence for the Lord

If we go about life focusing on becoming successful, we'll become worldly, selfish people. But success isn't always defined by great riches or fame. It can be a dream to have a successful ministry but one that is sought out without God's direct leading. It could be the desire to get a degree and a good job without surrendering these things to God. Any level of achievement means nothing in the place of death. Why bother doing well in this life, and why not do well in Jesus Christ instead? Let Him lead you to those places of success. Then you will have the greatest sense of peace being there. But if you do it of yourself, then you'll be walking contrary to the Lord.

If we only focus on our own self achievement, we're forgetting the main point of life. When we focus on this life and forget the next, it forces us into a corner of thought. Our thinking polarizes to be about ourselves, our wants, our needs, and our ambitions rather than God's. Thus our minds will begin to think with selfish regard while forsaking the needs of others. "Who's going to take care of 'number one'?" we'll say to ourselves. "Who's going to take care of my life and my family?" But we forget that God intends to take care of us in everything and requires *us* to take care of others, for He calls us to cast all our cares upon Him because He cares for us.

Although we would normally intend to do good, if we only focus on our own needs, we'll cast off the needs of others even when we can afford to help them. Why? Fear of loss. Although we have an abundance, we may fear that next trial rather than saving our brother or sister from their current trial.

Fear can be your friend or your enemy. For whatever you fear controls you. If you fear loss, it'll control you and lead you to live a selfish life. If you fear the Lord, it will lead you to walk in love and eternal life.

When our drive in life is to do better financially but not morally, our only authority slowly becomes ourselves. If we dictate our own futures, we'll forget the need for a foundation of love and honor. But if we fear the Lord through reverence, we will seek to live loving, holy, and godly lives, putting the Lord and His ambitions for us first.

As we stated previously, when we make life about ourselves and our own ambitions while taking out the need to give an account to a higher authority, morality becomes a mere opinion. We need to remember the account we'll give lest our faith and morality become governed by our own opinions.

When morality becomes an opinion, even the laws of a nation can change while its dignity crumbles. For in a democracy, the opinions of men rule. When men do not have to give an account to a higher authority, the gap between two different opinions widens, as we see happening with civil rights between Democrats and Republicans even now.

A higher authority keeps unity and establishes conformity among the people, which ultimately results in a greater peace for the individual and for the nation. But a nation that governs without God creates division among the people. God must govern us in all respects; if He doesn't, it creates divided hearts, nations, and families.

That gap is now widening, and its evidence is manifest in politics. For the world is in disarray in disputing its own rights. Indeed, some proclaim gay rights are necessary, while others proclaim that being gay is a mental illness and has nothing to do with rights or a lack of them. The right of abortion suggests that the mother has a right to kill her child while forsaking the child's right to live. People view guns as evil, whereas the morality of the people that wield them should be what we examine. God is no longer venerated in the government but is considered unnecessary and valueless for those who rule the people. We as a nation have departed so far from the principles of the founding fathers that America can no longer be recognized by the greatness she once stood for.

Everyone's opinion differs. For every positive opinion, there is a negative opinion. When democracy is ruled by mere opinions rather than giving an account to God, it blesses the most accepted group while trampling the rights of others. If the least accepted group becomes Christians, then we will be the ones being trampled, as we see is happening now. In an imperfect world, there can be no perfect freedom. To give a man a right is to take away another man's peace of mind. But submission to the Highest Authority would establish peace through reverence for God.

It is supreme for a man to honor the God-given gift of life. But where opinions rule, the fine lines between honor and abuse of life blur. How can a man determine the boundaries of morality without a Creator of that morality? How can a man not abuse their own purpose in life without established boundaries that define their integrity? For the principle of life has lost its foundation and has discovered its resting place in the heart of the individual.

In such a case, if the heart is sick, so is the principle of life.

God is the Creator and Founder of life. Therefore He should dictate to the heart of humanity the principle of his or her life. Yet men exhort you to follow after your own heart and that there is no reason to follow God every moment of your life.

They exhort you to further yourself and that you should make a better you out of yourself rather than self-improvement being a God directed process. We all seek to further ourselves. But who determines the definition of success? The individual who seeks to succeed or some higher power above that person, whether another more successful individual or God? Success is not defined by something we create in our own heart. In this world, the successful define success, and if we allow the world to influence us, we will slowly subject ourselves to their principles. They live seemingly peaceful or comfortable lives and would exhort you to do the same. For even Christians do this that they may appear more successful or better than others as to gain a following. As it is written,

> "They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them." (Galatians 4:17)

Others zealously court us to be like them. Many others both in the church and the world try to define what a successful Christian life should look like. Yet these things they do without being founded in the truth of the Scriptures. We need to bring everything back to the word and live by it. God tells us that we cannot serve two masters. The world exhorts you to live a comfortable life, but Jesus calls you to come outside your comfort zone to live for Him.

Their hearts are sick and so are the principles of their lives. We *MUST* depart our hearts and ambitions from the world's and rest them in Christ. The world is in need of Christ. Why then should we allow the American dream to infiltrate our practice of faith?

Our own hearts shouldn't determine our lives; Christ should. He created it after all! We don't know what the future holds and what will be best or worst for us. But God knows all these things and guides us through His love to the most perfect thing.

Now, what about those that have achieved the truest pinnacle of success

according to the world? Who do they have to look up to? Without a higher authority to look to, success no longer has meaning to the soul of a man. That authority they looked up to was man, when it should have been God. Now that they're on the top, seeing that they never venerated the Lord, they become their own form of god with their own principles. Then they teach you to follow them.

For them, life becomes a striving to stay on the top financially rather than an effort to go higher morally. There is no longer an established target but only what their heart desires. Therefore their only goal is to please their own heart. They set their own goals, not knowing where to go in life, and decide right and wrong for themselves rather than submitting to an already established morality defined by God. In today's generation, they live according to the philosophy of Moral Relativity. In other words, morals are defined by the individual and according to their philosophy; no one's morals are better than the next person's. They claim there is no God to look up to; therefore morality is something determined at the individual level. "You be who you are, and I'll be who I am. Accept me for who I am, and I'll accept you for you." They have two different sets of morals and yet accept each other under the same condition of "we are who we make ourselves to be." This philosophy, which as we stated, was called "Moral Relativity," is what created and justified Nazi Germany, the Columbine shooters, abortion, gay rights, and the oppression of the Christian faith. We don't accept others the way they are, because Jesus doesn't accept us sin and all. He requires us to repent. So because we preach repentance, they exhort you to accept them the way they are.

This process of thought has made its way into the church. "You believe what you want to believe, and I'll believe what I believe, seeing that our relationship with God is a personal one. You accept me for who I am, and I'll accept you for who you are." But God calls us to establish our faith not in our opinions but in His one truth and one doctrine. Even as it is written,

> "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." (1 Cor. 1:10)

And also,

> “Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, And give attention to know understanding; For I give you good doctrine: Do not forsake my law.” (Proverbs 4:1–2)

But others exhort you to follow what you think is best and how you feel it is best to apply the Bible in life. This is living according to your own opinion and not the guidance of the Spirit. The opinion of God is all that matters. So learn to listen to His voice and obey it always.

But there are many Christians who still believe that they should try to live a peaceful life here. This only leads to complacency in their walks and a warning from Jesus. For Jesus said,

> “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.” (Revelation 3:14–19)

When we live complacently, our works are neither cold nor hot, and these things displease the Lord. How can we justify ourselves trying to live a happy life when all we’re called to do is love the Lord and follow Him? Beloved, don’t you believe that the Lord will lead you to peace? Doesn’t He promise us an abundance of peace? Don’t strive for it in this world, but strive according to God’s working in your life, and in due and proper time He will grant you the peace you desire.

But the world reaches for their own peace. They don’t wait on God for anything because they are their own gods. We need to discuss these things so

we can understand how their actions are influencing the church. In America, people are taught to lead a happy life, get a good job, and make enough money to be comfortable. Thus money has become their trust and their god, though they don't seek to be rich. They only seek peace, but rather than seeking God for it, they seek money for it. Then they exhort you to do the same. From this philosophy, some in the church gain these principles and live them out. Then they teach you, "Why wouldn't God want you to go to college and get a good job?" But I ask you, "Why shouldn't God govern and lead your life? How has He ever led a person astray? And how many times has your own heart led you astray?" Don't follow your heart! Follow God and glorify Him in all your conduct. Don't make your decisions in life without Him, but let Him decide for you and teach you the soundness of wisdom.

But the rich in the world, what do they have? They have peace, joy, and a following. Some may suffer, but a few have pretty good lives and have everything they want. They fill their hearts up to the full and withhold nothing from themselves. Then they teach you and everyone else to do the same.

Yet after all their striving, they end their life with a grave stone marked, "Here lies the person who was on the top but is no longer," whereas the one who clung to their coattails has now overtaken them. Then the process of life, achievement, and death repeats itself through the apprentice.

In this cycle of madness, life becomes meaningless. You work hard to be on the top only to die and lose all you worked for. You can never stay on the top, for one day your life will pass from you. Therefore it is good to know where you're going when you die without an *ounce* of doubt. Rather than worrying about this life, focus on the next through being faithful to your relationship with Christ.

Some Christians get caught up in the cycle of success and achievement while forgetting the value of selfless love. They work hard, make a lot of money, then are honored by their pastors because they tithe a lot. Just because the pastor honors them doesn't mean God does. For what is respected among men, that is to say wealth, is an abomination to God. As we read,

"Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these

> things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.’” (Luke 16:14–15)

Wealth isn’t having a million dollars. It’s living a peaceful life through having enough money. If a person lives for the peace money brings, then they live for money. If your ambitions are to get a good life so you don’t have to suffer through your own work, God doesn’t justify that.

Those that pursue wealth end up succumbing to pride. Pride goes before destruction and leads the heart astray. Then a person that has everything they want is looked up to, and those that look up to them are deceived into thinking that life is about peace of heart. Yet this leads to “lordship syndrome” as I call it. Those on top act better than others so that the others feel as if they’re missing something. Then success ends up being defined by the person living a peaceful life. For in their morally relative lives, they decide what success should be and exhort you to do the same. There are still others in the church that do this, telling you that you aren’t a good or successful Christian unless you do this or that or live this way or that way. Yet their words are not founded on God’s one truth but their own opinions.

For one man ought not to be above another, seeing that God has created us to be equal. Rather than our loving each other as we should, we end up loving ourselves. We’ll act as lords, live complacent lives, and exercise some type of authority over one another. But we reap what we sow, both in this life and in the judgment of God.

If we sow selfless love, we will reap it. God created a hole in each of our hearts to be filled with selfless, unconditional love. When we don’t have it, we feel broken, dry, and empty, as we already know.

This is why some of the most successful unbelievers feel shallow and empty after achieving all their dreams. Even Christians can feel like this when they live for their own plans and not God’s.

Those on the top in the world may have peace around them, but inwardly they’re breaking. The world looks up to that person and admires them, whereas the person no longer sees meaning and purpose to life. So they put on a happy smile for their admirers, but deep down inside they feel

empty, as if something were missing. Then they decide to do one of the three things: Deny the empty feeling and fill themselves up with the things they enjoy; succumb to the emptiness and fall into a depression; or admit the hole and find and fill themselves with the love of God.

Generally, such a person will deny the emptiness and fill themselves with other things. Rarely do they commit to the other two. But if we deny our feelings without searching out the meaning behind them, then we deny the purpose of our God-given self-awareness.

God created our feelings of emptiness that we can understand our need to be filled by Him. This is the case for believers as well. Has there ever been a time when you've felt something was missing? Don't immediately brush it off as warfare, but seek the Lord because HE might be trying to tell you to turn aside and be filled by Him. Or He may be telling you that you've been going the wrong direction in life and that His plan was meant to take you elsewhere. If you feel empty at any time in your life, then God is telling you to drop everything and get filled up by Him now.

A person can spend their whole life trying to find peace their own way. They try to fill themselves with meaningless things only to still have the emptiness and ignore it in the end.

Rather than ignoring emptiness, one ought to ask themselves why they're feeling this way, search out the meaning, and fill themselves with the solution. Again, I can never emphasize enough that God gives us our empty feelings to understand our need to be filled by Him.

We should understand that if we feel empty, God is calling us to drop everything and be filled by Him. If you feel empty going a certain path in life, then maybe God doesn't want you going down that path. This emptiness can even be felt by pastors. While in a pursuit to honor God, they may have taken a single turn God didn't want them to take. But rather than seeking God as to the reason for the emptiness, some call it spiritual warfare, not realizing that it is God resisting them.

Then they claim the emptiness is a sacrifice they make for God. The truth is that God always fills us, even in the harshest of times. So why do some pastors struggle with emptiness while they preach that God will always fill you? No matter how you pursue success, if God isn't leading the way directly through the Holy Spirit, then you're walking the wrong way, which

is sin. Yes, I'll say it again! If you build a big, beautiful, multimillion dollar ministry that serves the poor across seas and God wanted you to be a pastor in a church of 45, then you're sinning. You are having your own righteousness and not following the true righteousness of God that comes through obedience.

Now, deep sorrow can make us feel empty, and if you're broken and empty, it doesn't mean anything is spiritually wrong. It just means that you need to be comforted by the Lord by sitting at His feet. But if we're not suffering like this and wake up empty one day, then we need to ask God why we're empty. We can't just ignore the hole and move on. God is trying to get our attention because our course of life has taken a wrong turn. Follow the fruit of God, and stay self-aware to your path in life.

Aware to Our Surroundings and Guiding Them to Christ

We have been created by God to look up to higher authorities, whether of man or of Spirit. But the man on top has no one to look up to except God. If such a person turns from God and only looks to themselves, then they play the place of God in their own life and over those whom they rule or influence. Even a Christian can suffer this fate if they focus on doing well in this life and forget to invest in the next. We ought to take this to heart lest we act like the world through subtle bad doctrine.

Similarly, when a nation completely casts off God, they risk a person with a debased mind rising above the people to rule them. For in due time a truly heartless, self-centered person may come into power, consolidate power, and gratify only themselves or those that help them achieve their purpose. They will serve themselves and not the people. Democracy was created to serve the people, not the president.

When such a person gives account to no one but themselves, they become their own form of god and may be led to abuse their power. Thus nations without God develop dictators, and when all nations cast off God, we'll see the worst dictator of them all—the Antichrist. Without fail, those that have disregarded authority have become the worst authorities on earth. Having God as the established authority teaches a man to walk with love and integrity.

Although many world leaders have supposedly “venerated God” while stepping on the toes of others, it is evident by their conduct that they honor God for the public, but behind closed doors, they only honor themselves. If a man truly venerated the established Authority, it would change his heart to beat at the pace of the love of God.

Therefore a person must consider their need for continually comparing themselves to the Higher Power of Christ, He who without fail rules uprightly and with unwavering love, integrity, honor, peace, and justice for all. We must not allow the world to fill this place with another philosophy. We must remain self-aware to the times we deviate from Christ and be fervent to get back on course with Him.

Rather than letting the world influence us, we should become an influence to the world. In democracy, the people have the power of a vote. We should come together and vote Christ back into the politics. We have the right of a petition, and the majority rules. There are more citizens in favor of God than not. But the government is creating more that are not in favor by indoctrinating the people with lies. We can’t sit idly by and let the world deceive itself. We are called to be a light and lead them to Christ. Yet many believers are just letting this evil happen to them.

Coming from a democratic nation, it is important for each of us to realize that God must be voted back into the government. We were given the gift of a vote, and we ought to use it to honor the Lord. Yet it is *proven* by voting statistics that many Christians are sitting idly by the wayside while allowing the government to cast off God in favor of “political correctness.” The loud voices of the few are overpowering the quiet opinions of the many. In this case, the loud voices are that of atheism and agnosticism.

This nation has quickly gone from a Christian nation to an atheistic one in just a couple generations. By doing nothing, we’re fulfilling our own prophecy, so to speak. When a nation casts off God, the Lord heaves it over, even as He did to Israel in the days of Babylon. Seeing that Christians have the God-given power of a vote, the responsibility lies on our shoulders. If we don’t even *try* to change this nation, then in a sense, we are guilty of America’s downfall. If we do try, then the situation is out of our hands if they do fall.

Yet statistics prove that no one is even trying, and if God gave us the

power of a vote, we should use it to bring Christ back into America. Stop letting the atheists push God out. Remember that Jesus said, “Where I am there my servant will be also.” If atheists push God out, they’re pushing you out as well. And where will you go when this nation is handed over to true wickedness?

You should be warned that if we do nothing, a great American persecution of the Christian faith is only a few generations away. God gave us the power to change the world through our right to vote. There are more of us than them! So rise up to the calling, and let God work through you to make a difference.

Rather than allowing evil to happen, let’s overcome evil with good. Let the love of God be established through your efforts, and may God do the rest. While God chooses the leaders of the nations, perhaps He put us Christians in this democratic nation that He can choose the leaders through His children. Yet statistics prove that His children are sitting idly by and allowing harm to come on the faith that He gave us power to protect.

If America is the heart of the Christian church, being a provider for all the brethren in need world-wide, where will the others be without us? God can do anything, but we shouldn’t allow evil to rise up in our corner of the world. There are relatively few nations that open-heartedly accept Christianity, even at the polls. Embrace God’s blessing and seek to make a difference before it’s too late.

This difference begins with our own hearts. If you want to change the world, first change yourself through Christ. After He has changed you and empowered you, step forward to make a difference. Let Him change you as you seek a deeper and more intimate relationship with Him daily that you can change others through His love. We are given self-awareness to compare our actions to Christ and to know whether or not we are conforming to Him the way we should. If we’re focused on this life and not a relationship with Him, we won’t grow. We need to test ourselves to see if we’re conforming to His design.

Overcoming Peer Pressure

We must pay attention to ourselves and compare ourselves to Christ constantly. If we live for our own goals in life, then our own hearts will rule

over us. When our hearts rule us, then our opinions become our god whether we realize it or not. Opinions are easily manipulated by the world's influence. Too many Christians say, "Hey brother, what is your opinion on this scripture?" and if they like it, they live by it. But God's truth is all that matters.

Where opinions reign over a person's life, success is only realized through a social mirror. Rather than a deeper relationship with Christ being that success, worldly achievement and a comfortable living becomes our goals. The purpose of life becomes wrapped around others' opinions of us, their wants, their needs and their perceptions of achievement.

Thus our dreams are in reality determined by the dreams of others. In this, the boundaries of self-actualization are not determined by self but by a socially painted picture of achievement. Therefore I do not proclaim that a man should self-actualize but rather "God-actualize."

Do not let the American dream determine God's dream for you. For the Creator of life has most assuredly created a purpose for the life He created. Indeed, *you* have been created for meaning and for purpose, a meaning that cannot be defined by the parameters of another man's opinions but by the heart of One who has cherished you in His thoughts since before He created time.

Rather than being driven by others' dreams for us and themselves, we should be driven to love God. Yes, there are plenty of times that people's opinions matter. Yet we shouldn't allow their opinions to be our driving factor in life. Rather, God's love should be as He leads us through His Spirit.

If others are leading us to God's love, then we should submit to that. This is when opinions matter. Whenever the opinion leads you to love the Lord with sincerity of heart, we should listen. But if a person has an idle dream for you to achieve success in life, you should question the motive. Is it to live well in this life or to do well in Christ? If it has nothing to do with a daily, personal walk with God, one should question why they should do it. Won't God choose the best course of life for you? Why do we need men to do that?

If going to college is the right course of life for you, won't God, who loves you, lead you in His love and tell you the right decisions to make? If a good paying and comfortable career is the path for you, wouldn't God

communicate that to you through His Spirit? Don't live according to logic like the world does, but be led by the voice of God.

A person such as your pastor, elder, or brother or sister in Christ should be listened to—if indeed they are leading you to Christ. But if they tell you to follow your heart or make your way in this life, then you should submit to God instead. Following your heart leads to foolishness. Going to college, having good careers, and doing well in this life shouldn't be our goals—even if that college is Bible college and that career is being a pastor. Follow God and honor Him through obedience, not your own works.

The world always seeks their own thing and expects God to honor them for the good they do. How does our doing the same distinguish us from them? We've always known this was wrong, so why do some believers fall back into this thought process? The influence of others around them no doubt. If we claim to have a relationship with God, then He should decide our futures.

He decides our future in heaven and should decide our future on earth as well. Rather than saying, "Why wouldn't God want me to have this career, or why wouldn't God want me to go to this college?" we should just ask Him what He wants that we can live by it. If He tells you not to do those things, then He has a more important purpose for your life that remains above your understanding. If He tells you yes, then you know you're led by God and can have peace in it.

Now, some Christians ask themselves, "Why wouldn't God want me opening this ministry or doing this good deed?" and they say, "If it's a good thing, then just do it!" But our good deeds can never amount to God's perfect deeds. We must always lay all our desires and plans before the Lord to pick up His will and live for it. Even as it is written,

> "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6–7)

Why does His peace cover us? Because we seek to be established in His plans in everything. If then you want the perfect peace of God at all times in your life, lay everything before Him and live for His plan alone.

We *MUST* surrender all things to God and let them be His design. Too many Christians pave their own path in life then try to bring God into the situations. Life isn't about how we bring God into it but about how He is the center. Remember that we are pilgrims in this life and should not live according to it. God may lead you to that successful career or education, but you shouldn't pursue it unless it has been surrendered to Him in prayer first.

To lay it down and surrender it suggests that you won't do it if God says no. Just because it makes sense to you doesn't mean it's God's ultimate plan for you. Our best ideas can't compare to God's perfect knowledge; He knows what is right and perfect for you. So seek His will and follow it.

People become rich and in control following their hearts. But it isn't about how we have control. Life is about how we give God control, seeing that He made us. A deeper relationship can't be found following our own hearts but living for God and seeking Him daily will. The opinions that should matter are from those that teach you to be led by Christ. But anything else shouldn't define our direction in life. Any person that lives for themselves is without love and under the judgment of God.

If we follow the social mirror, we'll be pressured into decisions that turn us from the Lord. Then we will learn to justify our actions even as they have done. We shouldn't seek to justify ourselves. Rather, we should seek the justification God gives us through following His Spirit and walking in His love.

For in the social mirror of life, we become the reflection of others' perceptions and desires. Yet our lives shouldn't be dictated by the hearts of other people. If you take their words seriously, you will become what they speak. Indeed, whatever word you take seriously you will become, whether the word of God or the words of men. Now consider for a moment the words that people say to you.

"You're not beautiful unless you look like this."

(Think of magazines.)

"You're not successful unless you live like this."

(Think of Hollywood.)

"You're not intelligent unless you know what I know."

(Think of worldly professors that preach knowledge contrary to God.)

"I've explained this to you how many times? How come *you* can't

figure it out?”

(As if such a person’s explanation needs no alteration to suit the individual mind? Therefore due to their own arrogance, they proclaim the fault is with you.)

“How come you’re always late?”

(Why can’t they accommodate your needs? Why do you always have to accommodate theirs without them having regard for yours? Can’t anyone have grace?)

“You need to work harder if you want to get anywhere in this company.”

(Due to fear of loss, you begin to serve their purpose and become a man-pleaser. Then some bosses may compel you to do things contrary to the Lord. Seeing that the fear of man has gripped you, temptation and sin will ensue.)

“You’re a terrible worker, a terrible employee, and if you don’t shape up, we need to part ways.”

(You’ve worked hard, really hard, but they don’t seem to notice. In this case, they use your fear of man to rule your actions. But as the psalmist said, “What can man do to me?”)

“You should wait to get married.”

(Marriage is your choice, not anyone else’s. It’s your life; why should others tell you how to live and who to be in love with? If God said “get married,” then why wait until others are ready for you? Obey God, not man. It’s your life, not theirs.)

“You should wait to have children.”

(They are *your* children; you get the God-given right to determine when to have them and how to raise them. Why do people play God, exhorting others when and if they should have families or not? God provides, but they would exhort you to wait until you have enough money to comfort you.)

“I would work on this relationship, but you’re just not worth it!”

(You’re worth everything to God, and such a person is so blinded by selfishness and rage that they can’t comprehend your real value. Loving you is worth more than life to God because He died for you. Submit to His love and be comforted by it.)

Did you notice that all of these statements are another person's opinions of you or how you ought to live life? These are their perceptions of you, and if taken seriously, they will dictate the culmination of your actions rather than Christ dictating. It's almost as if they would like to live your life for you, and if you do not live life their way, you're a disappointment or a failure.

This is the socially painted picture of achievement. But if we ultimately answer to God, why would we care about their opinions? To be free of another person's expectations gives an individual freedom from unnecessary boundaries. What boundaries should exist then? Those that have been appointed by God, not man.

Therefore, it is evident that in Christ a person can live the purpose of their life to the fullest. Yet the purpose of life and the meaning of it have not been defined by man, for man has not created life. But God has created you for His purpose, and that purpose is a relationship with Him. For the meaning of life is to have a relationship with Christ. Therefore be fervent for it, pursue it daily, and live according to it lest you lead a meaningless life.

God doesn't look at you in the same light as men. He doesn't perceive you as others do or even as you perceive yourself. He looks at you through a lens of perfect love. Although you may not be worth a relationship to others, God has given His life in the hope of having one with you.

He is always reaching for us, but we have to reach back. Relationships take two people working together to bond in love. It isn't a relationship unless we relate back to Him and give Him authority in our lives. Unless He is our personal Lord whom we allow to lovingly lead our lives, we can never experience the perfect fullness of meaning in our lives. There are many Christians that call Jesus their personal Lord but don't actually give Him lordship over their lives.

If indeed God is your Lord, then consider yourself. Have you ever taken the rule from Him to dictate your own purpose in life? Have you been led by Him down every bend and turn of life, or have you been leading yourself? Do you know what it means to be led by Him? What does it mean to be led by the Holy Spirit? God speaks to us through His Spirit. When we listen to the Holy Spirit, we are obeying and following God.

When we listen to our own hearts, we're living for selfish ambition as the world teaches us. In doing this, we aren't pleasing God but our own

purpose. Let God define your purpose by surrendering to the meaning He created for you. He knows your place in this life better than anyone else. He created you for that purpose; therefore submit to it and live life by His design.

Others' opinions shouldn't be a driving factor in how you live. To an extent, their opinions should matter but not to the extent that it shapes your goals in life. Let God create your goals. He knows the perfect path for you. Because He loves you, He'll lead you down that perfect path to nourish you and nurture your heart.

But people will zealously court you to live life their way, as if they know best. Even other Christians will do this to you. But don't submit to their plans for you; submit to God's plan. In reality, people such as that are trying to take charge of their life, not through directing their own hearts but by taking charge of the circumstances and people around them.

Some pastors will exhort you to stay at their church when God has called you elsewhere. Why would they do this? Fear of loss. They fear losing your tithes because they've been living life in a social mirror. So they seek to lord over you rather than serve your relationship with Christ. But a true pastor is one that will tell you to follow God no matter what.

Many people will seek to design your life. Some Christians will want you to fit in their perfect world, their way, rather than being the influence God calls you to be. They want to create their own world, and you have to fit perfectly in it or you're not worth anything to them.

Their perceptions of you shouldn't matter. Your heart should reflect God's heart at all times, with no regard to what others are thinking. If they don't like you reflecting the goodness, love, and morality of God, then they have a corrupted heart and corrupted principle. Why veer off the course of "rightness" to compromise through political "correctness"? What may be "socially correct" is not always morally correct—even in the church.

In the end, God's opinion is all that matters. If someone tells you you're ugly, God says you're beautiful. If anyone tells you that you're not worth love, God says that you're worth dying for just to love. Although you have not meant the world to some, God created the world to have a place to meet with you to love you, cherish you, and have a relationship with you.

Therefore we should be diligent to please the One who was pleased to love us the most. No one else's opinion should matter but the Lord's. Yes,

God will lead you through your pastors and elders, but there is a time and a place to walk with God without the need for direction.

Your pastors walk with the Lord without anyone but God leading them. Even so, every believer must grow in this while taking their pastor's teachings to heart. Live them out and practice them as God leads you and speaks to you through them. Then grow until you only need God's direction, even as they did. All believers should do this even if they never become teachers.

We have been given free will and self-awareness that we may test ourselves to see if we're conforming to God's heart. Becoming like Him with pure love and perfect moral goodness should be the goal of every person. Yet this cannot be attained without a deep regard for our relationship with Him.

Conformed to the Spirit and Humble in Heart

Unless we have received and submit to His Holy Spirit, we will never conform to His heart. His Spirit guides us through conviction to fulfill the will of God. If a person is led by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, they will obtain perfect moral goodness, a sound mind, perfect peace, and a pure heart. But if a person is not led by God's conviction, what then are they led by? Therefore a person must receive the Spirit of God and obey His voice and conviction at all times.

This needs to be the center of who we are. Do you believe God can lead you astray? Or do you believe He will never lead you astray? If you truly believe that all of God's ways are perfect, then submit to them by obeying His Spirit. Don't question Him, but obey His voice even if it doesn't make sense.

We need to watch our walks and conform to His design. God doesn't conform to our world. When we live our lives and try to bring God in it rather than letting Him lead our lives, we are forcing Him to conform to us. God will never conform to our box. We must conform to Him and obey His Holy Spirit.

He will show you how to be perfectly loving. By walking in His love, we fulfill the law. Remember that the fruit of the Spirit is love. We bear this fruit by listening to and obeying Him. We don't have to try to be good. Goodness comes naturally for those that *obey* the Spirit of God.

That's one of the lessons taught in the book of Genesis. With Adam and Eve, we see that those who do not obey God sin, and disobedience corrupts both the individual and the whole world. But those that listen to God love Him, even as Abraham did. And those that obey are called the friends of God even as Abraham was.

Indeed, we have received the gift of self-awareness that we may determine what path we're taking in life and make the proper course corrections. The path we should take is the one God leads us down.

The true definition of self-awareness is the ability to think of one's own thoughts and form opinions about them. For example: can you imagine yourself in the third person? Can you imagine being in another person and looking at yourself? Imagine a person standing in your room looking at you. Now imagine looking at yourself through their eyes. What do you see yourself as? What do you think about yourself? What do you think about your thoughts you're thinking now?

Self-awareness comes from a truly higher state of thought—the ability to be aware of the state of heart and mind. Through self-awareness, we are given the gift of personal growth because we can determine our own state of heart and mind to make proper corrections to conform to Christ. Thus we can grow in character and wisdom by constantly paying attention to our actions and thoughts and seeking to conform them to the Lord.

Therefore we should always be examining our hearts, our intentions, and our thoughts. Are we thinking with an edifying mind? Are we meditating on God's Spirit as we should? What are our intentions? Are we being selfish? How can we grow as an individual? Are we showing love as we should? How are we treating strangers? Are we good to our friends only, or are we taking care of the whole body of Christ, even if we don't know them personally?

Self-awareness helps us to see our weaknesses and gives us an opportunity to grow in them. However, if we don't keep a humble heart, pride may contort our judgment of ourselves. Our strengths become over-inflated, and our weaknesses are given excuses or are overlooked altogether. No level of thought, self-awareness, or conscious effort can help a person grow without humility. Unless we can admit our faults and weaknesses, we can never overcome them.

God created us to overcome. When God created man, He told him to

rule over the world and take care of it. Just this command alone is a commission to dominate. Since God's commission for man at creation, every manner of creature has been subdued and ruled over. Horses run for the rider, and the rider turns the horse with a tiny bit. He spurs the creature on, and it obeys him. Dolphins do flips and tricks for a single fish, and dogs roll and bark for a pat on the head. Mankind has mastered all things and overcome everything under heaven, yet no man has tamed his own heart.

For the hearts of men are still with sin, and they fill our mouths with evil. How then can we be led by our own hearts? They are tainted with sin!

Like a blind man groping to see, so the heart of a man understands his life around him. But God is the light of the eye, and by His heart, we can understand the meaning of life. If we submit to His direction and opinions, we will find the perfect course in life. If we seek to pave our own paths, we'll be a sailing ship without a rudder. Image the turmoil that enters the heart in the day a raging storm comes. For without a rudder, no one can avoid the sinking and rising of the sea through finding safe harbor.

Our conscious thought helps us to perceive our daily need for Christ and our need to correct ourselves as we follow Him. If we choose to be ruled by anything, then God's love should be the dictator of our hearts. We must allow His heart to reign over our own. If we love God, we'll seek to continually please Him. In order to please Him, we need to obey Him. Even as Jesus said,

> "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." (John 15:14)

In this, you need to make use of your God-given self-awareness. Constantly focus on your weaknesses and need for growth. Don't consider your strengths. By dwelling on them, they will become an issue of pride. Thus your strengths will be the source of your greatest weaknesses because everyone falls through pride.

When you compare yourself to God, you begin to realize that everything you are and in everything you have, you are altogether weak and in need of a Savior. Admit this, and make His strength your strength. For a strong Christian is not determined by his own strength. Rather, he is weak and able to admit it. Then by admitting that he is altogether weak, he makes Christ his strength.

Thus he appears strong because he has God as his strength. Therefore humble yourself before the Lord and be strengthened by His mighty hand. Let his love govern your heart, and His own power will rise you up.

Not by might or by strength do we stand but by faith in God's strength, which empowers us daily for victory over all things. For the man of this earth has subdued all things, but his own heart he hasn't conquered. Yet the man in Christ subdues all things and knows no master in this world but Jesus Christ.

So take the time to confess your weaknesses and practice humility. Then you'll find true strength. Be honest with yourself, and always look for the puffing of pride. Be self-aware to any pride that may rise up in your heart and resist it.

Always consider how you may not be measuring up to God's heart, His true standards, or His desires for you then make the necessary course correction in your day. How are you drawing near to God and loving Him? How are you obeying Him and seeking His direction daily? How are you loving others? How are you showing kindness? Are you hearing from God and obeying His Spirit? Are you following His heart or your own? Should you say what's on your mind? Will your words benefit others or yourself? Will your words build up or tear down?

Do not let your heart rule over you lest your tongue be set free to speak evil. For the tongue knows no master, because the heart of a man needs taming. What man can tame his tongue? But those that are Christ's can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens us.

Mouths were made to express the heart. So let your heart be filled with love, and your mouth will show it. Kiss the ear with kindness, but don't fill it with oil. Use sincere and loving words of truth and watch it change your life as you bless someone else's. Again, it's not that we should pour oil in someone's ear, but we should say kind and true things frequently to bless the heart as Christ would call us to do.

Indeed, we reap what we sow. If you want to reap better relationships with those around you, then sow kindness with your words and your deeds in your family, friends, and even your enemies. Love changes a person's perspective and outlook on life. If you love another, it will change their perspective of you and they'll be drawn to you.

They'll like you, listen to you, respect you, and even be more easily

persuaded by you. The power of love's persuasion is infinite. Therefore do not be overcome by evil, but overcome an evil person with love.

Continually focus on how you can grow. We should always be growing in the Lord and should never reach a plateau or a state of complacency. I have heard many say, "I'm not growing anymore because I've reached a plateau in life." There are no plateaus, only a pinnacle, and that pinnacle is perfection. So if you claim you don't need to grow any more, then you're claiming that every action and every motive of yours is exactly like God's. If you can't claim that with confidence, then you still need to grow and haven't been comparing your heart to the Lord's as you should. Take the time to employ this habit. Keep growing in Christ. Compare yourself to God, and submit to His leading.

Stop trying to change the world around you. Change yourself, and it will change the way you respond to life. When you change the way you respond to life, it will change the way the people and things of life respond to you. Some believe they need to change the people and circumstance around them to make their lives better, when the real issues lie within their own hearts. Examine yourself and not another. Take the plank out of your own eye then afterward you will see clearly to lovingly help your brother out.

Even as Jesus said,

> "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me remove the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the plank that is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck that is in your brother's eye." (Luke 6:41–42)

In this, Jesus is telling us to examine ourselves first and grow. Don't change the world around you, but change yourself through submitting to God. However, that scripture does go on to say that once you have removed the plank from your own eye, you can go forward and help the other person remove their speck. Yet this isn't a condemning judgment we give them, as we are commanded not to condemn. Rather, we are called to come alongside them and help them in their weaknesses to honor God.

Whether by words of wisdom, encouragement that increases the necessary faith to overcome, or a loving rebuke, we are called to help our brethren keep their course in Christ. For no man should be overtaken by sin, but all should lovingly guide a sinner into the arms of Christ lest such a person be captivated by sin and be taken away from among us. As it is written,

> "And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you." (1 Cor. 5:2)

How are we walking in love by allowing others around us to sin and go on believing what they want to believe? For Christ told us that when we remove the plank, we should help a brother remove the speck, not judge and condemn him for it. Now, who are those who have removed their planks? Those who are spiritual and persist in faith no doubt. And that those who are spiritual should lovingly rebuke those who are captivated by sin is evident. For it is written,

> "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal. 6:1–2)

What is the law of Christ? Love. If then we love one another and honor Christ, we will turn each other to Christ for the edification of the soul. Now, those who are spiritual are the ones that have examined their own hearts and grown in the Spirit. Those that have a plank constantly focus on others and how everyone else needs to change. Although they want to change their own life, they feel that the way to do it is to change others. Yet we are called to examine ourselves and grow in the Spirit. Galatians goes on to say,

> "But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For each one shall bear his own load." (Gal. 6:4–5)

Paul exhorts us that we should be bearing our own load in Christ, learning to grow in this life without needing rebukes. We should be the ones

to rebuke ourselves, seeking to grow with a fervent heart for Christ. If we love Him, then we will seek to please Him. We know that the only way to please Him is to become like Him.

Yet there is no one like God. Therefore we must admit that without Christ, we are nothing and are in need of the substance and strength of Christ. This is not a call to crush our own spirits. Rather, this is a call to admit that truth that in us nothing good dwells, except Christ. As we read,

> "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find." (Rom. 7:18)

The point Paul is making is that if we examine ourselves to see our need for growth, we also need to realize that strength is found in Christ alone. We are nothing without the Lord. Now having Him, we are still nothing, but He is everything. Compared to God, we are nothing. For from dust we were made, but God always is and was and is yet to come.

Therefore let us not put our faith in our own abilities but in Christ. As we discussed earlier, we need to focus on how we are keeping with Christ. That way we may submit to Christ through abiding in His word and meditating on His Holy Spirit. In this, all things come full circle when we realize that we need to be humble.

Humility doesn't mean that we make ourselves out to be less than we are. It means that we admit the truth that compared to Christ, we are nothing. We ought not to be comparing ourselves with others but with the Lord. For we also read,

> "For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, *are not wise*." (2 Cor. 10:12)

We are found wise by comparing ourselves to the King of wisdom and becoming more like Him through submission, reverence, and obedience. As we said, a strong Christian is not strong in themselves; rather, they are weak and have God as their strength. Even as Jesus said to Paul,

> "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12:9)

Knowing that our strength is found in God, we must humble ourselves. As we also read,

> "For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself." (Gal. 6:3)

The issue with the interpretation occurs in the statement "when he is nothing." In the English language, "when" can mean a period of time. Therefore some may subconsciously read into this verse as saying, "when you're nothing in these categories of life, admit it," or "when you're nothing at this period of time, don't think you're something." But this verse is actually calling us to continual humility according to the original Greek. The word for "when he is" in Greek is '*ON*,' which in English literally means 'being.' So when we literally translate the verse, it says, "For if anyone thinks himself to be something, *being* nothing, he deceives himself."

Compared to Christ, we are all nothing. There is nothing good that dwells in our flesh. The only good thing in us is Christ. Knowing this, we should *always* humble ourselves that we can admit our faults. If we don't view our weaknesses to be weak, we will never pursue growth. This is why our humility needs to be an admission of truth. If we admit that we are weak creatures in need of a Savior, then we need to admit all our weaknesses as well that we may grow beyond them.

Is this not how we come into salvation? We admit we're too weak to restore and save ourselves. Then by admitting our faults and need for Jesus, we seek a relationship with Him.

Thus the means to growth is the same as the means to salvation. That is to say that as we focus on our foundation (Christ) in comparing ourselves to Him and by being strengthened by Him, we grow. While we know this to be true yet we seem to forget to apply it at all times as we should.

The busy-ness of everyday life captivates our attention and causes us to forget the things we need to be doing. As we forget, we end up dried out, tired, and in need of a recharge but unable to find it (except maybe on Sunday or during Bible study). In the end, we find that we need a reminder and a

revival fire rekindled in our hearts; that way we can continue with strength every day. Thereafter as we meditate on the Spirit of the Lord, we find ourselves being strengthened to overcome and rekindled in His love.

So if we want to grow, we need to pay attention to the Spirit's presence always. We must continually abide in Him. We can't change if we aren't comparing our hearts to the Lord. We can't compare ourselves to Him if we aren't reflecting on Him.

When we came to Christ, we established a personal relationship with Him. We need to focus on Him and communicate with Him continually, not just on Sunday or at Bible study. When you're in the presence of your friend or spouse, do you increase your relationship by merely thinking about them? Do you increase it by talking about them while ignoring their presence? No, rather you grow in a relationship through being personal and turning to them and communicating with them at an intimate and personal level. Similarly, God is always with us. If we aren't paying attention to His presence and communicating with Him, then we won't grow in a relationship with Him.

Therefore we must do more than talk about God, think about Him, and sing about Him. We must remember to be personal and carry a conversation with his Holy Spirit constantly. We must speak to Him in prayer and sing to Him—to His face—with adoration in worship. Also, we need to do these things in our thoughts while our mouths must be silent. This should be an ongoing thing throughout the day every day. Even as it is written,

> "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5:16–18)

Can you continually shower God with gratitude in praiseful worship? Have you ever tried praying without ceasing? Even in difficult places such as work? You should! We are called by God to constantly communicate with Him through prayer and praise Him in the giving of thanks. By so doing, it helps us to meditate on the presence of the Spirit. When we focus on His presence, we are able to hear Him more clearly.

How can we obey Him if we can't hear Him? How can we hear Him if we're giving our attention to the activities of the day and not Him? But if we focus on Him, we will hear Him, and when we hear Him, we have the

opportunity to obey Him. Thus we'll please Him because we're paying attention to His heart and obeying Him. Hence we will be righteous because our heart is set on hearing and obeying the Holy Spirit at all times.

We are called to obey the conviction of the Spirit *always*. If we aren't living according to His conviction, then what are we living according to? Sin no doubt. So it is wise to sensitize ourselves to His voice and obey it always. Focus on Him through prayer and worship, but listen intently for His gentle, soft whispers to live by them. Discern His voice that you may live according to it. Our own heart and the enemy seek to deceive us, therefore we must spend much time seeking the Lord to grow in understanding His voice.

Spend much time in the word. Take your walk with Him seriously, and grow your understanding of the Bible. We walk by faith, and faith comes from His word, both what is written and what He speaks. If He calls you to do something, you need to have faith that He will complete what He said.

The Bible was once the spoken word of God in the day it was being written. The Holy Spirit spoke into the hearts of men, and they wrote what God laid on their hearts. Thereafter it became the written word. The written word is perfect, but our understanding of His voice isn't always perfect. Yet those who wrote the Bible had a perfect understanding. Therefore we also can grow to perfectly understand God's voice, for He does not give His Spirit by measure, and He personally favors no one. Our foundation must be on the Scriptures that we may better understand how He speaks to us and leads us in a daily walk with Him.

This is the purpose to the Scriptures, not to merely know them but to grow to understand God's voice through them that we may live according to His word. We practice the Scriptures as the Spirit convicts us. He shows us on a daily basis how and when to apply them. Then He gives us strength to apply them as we walk in Him by faith in His word. Thus our faith must be in more than the written word of God but also in the voice of the Spirit, which is expressed to us daily.

Bibles are for studying, not reading. So study your Bible, and do not merely read it. Grow your knowledge of the word of God, and the Holy Spirit will give you wisdom. Knowledge is stored information, whereas wisdom is the ability to accurately apply it. The Holy Spirit shows you how to accurately apply the Scriptures in a daily walk. He therefore gives you the

wisdom to walk in the knowledge of the word. Submit to Him and learn His voice.

If we don’t stay personal with Him, then we’re missing the whole point to life. We were created for a relationship with God, and we need to keep it personal. By remaining self-aware, it can help you discern whether you’re keeping it intimate and meditating on Him as you should.

It will help you determine if you’re listening to and obeying His voice. Then when you have discrepancies, you can change yourself. The more like Him we become, the greater we will be. He is the Highest Authority and the ultimate projection for our goals. To obtain His character and likeliness is to obtain perfect moral goodness, as we know.

HABIT THREE

PURSUIT OF WISDOM

WISDOM IS SUPREME. Therefore wisdom must govern the paths of a man's life. When wisdom enters your heart, it brings a lifelong peace and soundness of mind.

God is the source and center of all wisdom. The more we understand the heart of God, the wiser we will become. Now, there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is merely stored information while wisdom is the ability to accurately apply it. Wisdom is not a spiritual gift for the few but a requirement for the many. If we do not accurately apply the word of God in life, we will be ashamed before Him. As it is written,

> "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Tim. 2:15)

We are called to apply and live out the Scriptures in truth and with accuracy. How can we expect God to be pleased in us unless we faithfully seek to please Him through obedience to His word? This isn't a call to legalism but a call to obedience through the accurate application of the word of God.

Indeed, we are called to grow in wisdom, and the wisdom of God should be the first thing we seek. Seeing that it is the most important wisdom a person could find, it will be our emphasis in this habit. And as it is also written,

> “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness’; and again, ‘The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.’” (1 Cor. 3:18–20)

God desires us to be spiritually sound and habitually wise people. Yet He doesn’t exhort us to know many worldly things but rather to plunge the depths of spiritual wisdom. The wisdom of the Spirit isn’t something we can find in and of ourselves. Some people read the scriptures and interpret it for themselves. God has a specific meaning to the word, thus it is always best to pray before we read.

If we listen to the Spirit while we seek wisdom, God will lead us to the truthful outcomes. Therefore it is always good to habitually put our hearts before the Lord to learn the truth about life around us. All wisdom is the accurate application of knowledge in *truth*.

Solomon asked the Lord for wisdom, and God made him wise in all things. Yet the most profound and most influential wisdom he had was spiritual. The Scriptures tell us that he knew all manner of knowledge, even of science, and confounded those around him. Yet what do we see in the scriptures? Notes about the birds he studied or deep spiritual wisdom to guide our relationships in Christ?

He was wise in all things no doubt, but the wisdom that remains forever is the wisdom of God. Therefore seek the wisdom that’s eternally impactful. Remember that this world will be dissolved being on fire, yet the wisdom of God will remain forever.

Do not seek wisdom of yourself but pray for it and have faith. For Solomon sought the Lord, and God gave it to Him. As we read,

> “At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night;
> and God said, ‘Ask! What shall I give you?’
>
> > “And Solomon said: ‘You have shown great mercy to Your servant David my father, because he walked before You in truth, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You; You have continued this great kindness for him, and You have given him a

son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?"

"The speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing. Then God said to him: "Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you. And I have also given you what you have not asked: both riches and honor, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days. So if you walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days." (1 Kings 3:5–14)

Then what do the scripture say of Solomon later?

"And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding, and largeness of heart like the sand on the seashore. Thus Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men—than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five. Also he spoke of trees, from the cedar tree of Lebanon even to the hyssop that springs out of the wall; he spoke also of animals, of birds, of creeping things, and of fish. And men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear the wisdom of Solomon." (1 Kings 4:29–34)

God will indeed give us wisdom in regard to all things. Yet it is He who shows us how to accurately apply all things. For there is little greater to request of the Lord than wisdom. Some may claim, “Love fulfills the law; seek that!” Indeed we ought to, and rightly so. But it is His Spirit who shows us how to rightly apply love, which is the wisdom of love. True love is found by learning to love another with wisdom. As it is written,

> “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment.” (Phil. 1:9)

Now, some may argue that they can find wisdom of their own accord. “God gave me a brain and an imagination to use it. Why do I need God to show me these things?” Who made wisdom, and what is its source? Who is wiser than God? Who can compare to Him and contain infinite knowledge like Him? Consider all that the wisdom of God has accomplished.

By His wisdom He made the sun and the stars. The sun is roughly 1.3 million times bigger than our world by volume. Yet the largest known star is VY Canis Majoris, which is nearly 12 billion times the size of the sun! That makes it over 15 quadrillion times the size of earth! For those who don’t know, a quadrillion is one billion millions.

Even though they’re so large, the stars are as numerous as the grains of sand on a beach. There are so many that since creation, man is still trying to count them all. The universe itself is so enormous that no one could ever cross it. But to God, its length is a mere span of His hand. As we read,

> “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, measured heaven with a span and calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?” (Isa. 40:12)

The sight of a star tells us “God has been here,” where no man could ever hope to go. God, in His wisdom, made the sea and taught the waters to collect together that dry land may appear. He raised up the mountains and lowered valleys. He created birds of the air, fish, and all manner of creatures in the sea. Then, in His wisdom, He made them live.

Consider all the creatures He’s made! From insects to reptiles to the teaming life of the deep seas to every land dwelling animal. There are so

many creatures that one cannot even count them! God gave Adam a commission to name all the creatures, and to this day, nearly five and a half thousand years later, we are still finding new animals to name every year.

Consider also all the animals that have gone extinct. There is no telling of all that existed before the Flood, and what remains is a small fragment of what there used to be. Scientists speculate that there were as many as 4 billion different species of animals walking the earth at one given point in time. Now after the flood, over-predation, the effects of man, disease, famine, among others things, there are only 50 million known species in the world. Scientists estimate that 99.9% of all species that have existed throughout all time are now extinct! With 50 million species still around today, that shows the great diversity God created this earth to have. His wisdom is utterly incomprehensible!

To this day no one knows how life exists or how it works. They understand the chemical reactions but not the source or substance of life itself. If life consisted of mere chemistry, then why can't a scientist create a form of life from atoms and molecules that's never been seen before? Instead, they need pieces of life (such as DNA) to create more life. But God, in His wisdom, created molecules, atoms, electrons, protons, neutrons, and all manner of particles that create the world we know. Then He chose the various particles, made a creature, and breathed life into it.

The smallest things in creation are so complex that no one fully understands them to this day. Many particles still remain theories and have never been observed because they're too small and difficult to detect. But the largest of all things are made from the smallest of all. For God, in His wisdom, made all these things come together to create the mountains, the sky, the oceans, and even planets and stars larger than our world.

God understands these things and created the universe in all its complexities in just six days. Yet man has spent thousands of years trying to figure out creation and still can't comprehend the faintest things about it. If we can't comprehend what God did thousands of years ago, how can we even hope to understand what He's doing now and what He will do? Are not His plans better than ours? Yet many try to apply the things of God without His direction. But no one can comprehend the works of God, so how can they hope to apply them without Him working through them? But even as it is

written,

> "As you do not know what is the way of the wind, Or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, So you do not know the works of God who makes everything." (Eccl. 11:5)

It's a true saying that what we don't know is far greater than what we do know. All the knowledge of mankind combined since creation until now amounts to nothing compared to one second of God's infinite and perfect wisdom.

Why then would anyone seek wisdom in and of themselves? Why would they seek to be wise by themselves? God created all things and authored wisdom. Shouldn't we seek it at its source?

Do the thirsty wait for the rain to collect in puddles to collect it in vessels? Or do they go down deep to the source of water and drink as much as they want? Even so, we should dig deep in our relationship with the Lord and draw up His wisdom. We gain more wisdom by seeking it while listening to God's voice during our pursuit. In this, He directs us to the wisest outcome.

Many people do this with the larger decisions in life but forget to be led in a daily walk with Christ. People will fast for a week in the big decisions then they seem to think they can handle it on their own in the smaller things. But if you were submissive in all things, then you'd understand the voice of God and wouldn't need to fast for direction from Him. For His direction would come naturally to you seeing that you practice it constantly.

We must listen to God's Spirit and obey Him on a moment by moment basis. As we said, the biggest things in our universe are made from the smallest. Even so, your smallest steps will always equate to the bigger ones. Therefore we must seek God and His wisdom on a daily basis and not only in the big decisions in life. But that God judges us according to the little things is evident. For Jesus said,

> "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much." (Luke 16:10)

Knowing this, we should seek to be found faithful in Christ through following His Spirit. The least we do adds up to the greatest. Seeing that the

bigger things are created by the smaller, you can't possibly be following God in the big decisions unless you've been surrendering to Him in the small ones as well.

Yet some do not surrender every moment to the Lord. They justify their stand point and seek to lead their own lives. God gives us wisdom, and we should seek it from Him. In order to grow in it, we must be listening to His Spirit daily and obeying Him. How, even for a moment, can we think that anything else in this world can compare to Him? For we read,

> "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, measured heaven with a span and calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His counselor has taught Him? With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him, And taught Him in the path of justice? Who taught Him knowledge, And showed Him the way of understanding?
>
> Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, And are counted as the small dust on the scales; Look, He lifts up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, Nor its beasts sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before Him are as nothing, And they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless.
>
> To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?" (Isa. 40:12–18)

The wisdom of God is not found through colleges and extensive study. Not even Bible colleges can help you unless you've been led there by God. God is the ultimate source of wisdom, and Jesus is our mediator, not men in schools. If the Spirit specifically led you to Bible school, that's one thing, but if you go of your own accord, your works are not through Christ and cannot attain to His. This doesn't honor God to seek to be taught by men, but God exhorts us to be taught by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit connects us to the heart and mind of Christ, and through Him, we find our wisdom. Even as it is written,

> "For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge

and understanding." (Prov. 2:6)

And also,

> "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual." (1 Cor. 2:13)

And as Jesus also said,

> "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you." (John 14:26)

The Holy Spirit teaches us as we learn His voice. Then when we know it with certainty, He shows us the meaning of the Scriptures and how to apply them daily.

Yes, we should listen to the teachings of our pastors, but we must not neglect our personal relationship with the Lord. A true pastor has received a spiritual gift from the Lord and teaches you through the Spirit as he is led. Therefore it is God teaching you through the man and not the man himself. As we grow in the Lord, we will be able to discern His voice more accurately through others. Then, with discernment and discretion, we can rightly divide what the Lord is saying and what the individual is telling us.

Now, we should be careful in seeking the wisdom of this world and not of God. Yes, God will call some of us to be scientists, scholars, businessmen, politicians, etc., which requires a wholesome college education, but the wisdom of God should come before education in this world. Although being properly educated is an important facet of life, if we cast off the need for godly wisdom, then we make ourselves fools in the end. This is why we read verses such as,

> "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness.'" (1 Cor. 3:19)

And also,

> "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all

these things shall be added to you." (Matt. 6:33)

Although this is discussing our needs, some turn to education to fill their needs rather than wholly surrendering their lives to Christ and trusting in Him. Such people desire a better income and fear loss if they don't have it. In this case, their faith is in money, education, and self-actualization rather than the Lord.

They put themselves through school, make a career change, and never lay any of their decisions at the feet of God. Then they justify it saying, "Why wouldn't God want this?" rather than asking God personally to be led by Him. If we always knew what God wanted, then why would we need a Savior? Why would we need His Spirit to lead and guide us? Some claim that now that they are saved, their minds lead them accurately having been renewed by the Spirit. But if the Holy Spirit isn't directly leading that mind, such a person is forgetting that they are still flesh and sin. So they admit that they sin, but when they want to do a good thing, it's never sin to them. The world tries to do good things then expects God to be happy with them. We know that no one is saved through good deeds, so why would we begin to justify our works rather than seeking to obey the Holy Spirit?

But because we have followed our own hearts, we've sinned, and thus we need atonement. Is life about living for this life or for Christ? We are pilgrims and should allow the Guide to lead us in our journey. Is it not written,

> "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation." (1 Pet. 2:11–12)

And also,

> "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from

> which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them." (Heb. 11:13–16)

Indeed, we are called to come out from this world and embrace a relationship with the Lord. For we also read,

> "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'
>
> Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.'
>
> 'I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'" (2 Cor. 6:14–18)

We should seek to be educated and wise as God leads us, but our relationship with Christ should come first. The kingdom of God is the Holy Spirit. Remember that Jesus said it is within you. As Jesus said,

> "nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.'" (Luke 17:21)

Indeed, the Spirit is in you, and as we previously said, we must seek first the kingdom. Seek the Holy Spirit first and be led by Him in all things. What's wrong with being led by God in everything? Some act as if it's not necessary, but in truth, they are justifying living by their own desires. For those that do not follow and obey the Spirit sin. If then it is sin, how can they claim to be justified when they won't repent of that sin and follow the Spirit wholeheartedly now? For without repentance, no man is saved! Jesus wasn't crucified to justify sin but to condemn it in the flesh that all men may be saved by dying to sin and living to Christ through the Holy Spirit.

So learn to be led by God in all things. If God doesn't want us educated

in what we want to be educated in, then we need to learn to live a life of surrender—even if that education is Bible college. Both the Holy Spirit and your church should be able to offer you everything you could find at Bible college. If the Spirit isn't good enough for you, then what is? The principle of wisdom is found in Christ. Note that Solomon was wise in all things, and where did he get that from? He asked the Lord, and God made him a soundly wise individual.

Therefore we must lay our hearts before the Lord. We have greater resources for finding wisdom than the world does. The worldly college teaches that evolution is truth, among many other unfounded lies. If you rely solely on their teachings, you'll be like the world, having their wisdom, which is foolishness to God. So if anyone wants to be a fool, then let them be educated by the world. But if anyone seeks God for wisdom in truth, they will find it. For it is also written,

> "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." (James 1:5–8)

Why does it call the doubter double-minded and unstable? Because God intends to give us wisdom as we seek it! We are called by God to continually seek wisdom and grow in it. But the wisdom we should seek first is spiritual wisdom as we seek to grow in our relationship with the Lord. Then, as God leads us, we should further ourselves with other forms of education. Again, that's if He leads us to do so. If not, then just follow God and be content with the gift of eternal life by not living for this world.

We *must* learn to be led by Him. God has a plan for our lives, and we ought to remain submissive to it. As it is written,

> "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

And again,

> "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

The original Hebrew for the word "thought" is machăshâbâh or machăshebeth, which can also mean "plan" or "purpose." This is why some translations of the Bible translate this verse as saying,

"I know the plans that I have for you…"

Quite literally God is saying, "I have a purpose and a plan for you," and we are called to submit to it. Similarly, we are given a place in the body of Christ and receive spiritual gifts from the Lord. These gifts and plans ultimately lead us to our place in life. God may want you to work at a particular job to have a greater impact on a certain individual's life. You might be the person God wants to use to witness, and it may require a completely different career than you'd pursue. But if you succumb to temptation and selfishly seek a comfortable job rather than being led by God, a soul might be lost because of you. Who are we to say how a person may be saved? Perhaps the only time they'd choose to accept Christ is through the words you share with them. But if you're not there at the job, they'll be lost. Not that this is always the case, but how can we know unless we obey God? God doesn't need us but he still holds us accountable for unrepentant disobedience. There are many doors that God's love can step through. Let that door be you as you surrender to the Lord's leading.

God's plans are always best. Therefore, lest we think we know better than God, we should submit to them. We don't know what He has willed and what He has planned. God will give us wisdom, even earthly wisdom as He gave Solomon, but it will be what is most useful and impactful for our place in Christ. As we read,

> "Then Moses called Bezalel and Aholiab, and every gifted artisan in whose heart the LORD had put wisdom, everyone whose heart was stirred, to come and do the work." (Ex. 36:2)

Yes, we should seek to better ourselves but only under the guiding hand of Christ. The Lord will lead us to the most impactful wisdom for eternal life even in worldly knowledge. Therefore we must remain submissive under His

guiding hand. And who is our Guide?

> "For as many as are led by the *Spirit* of God, these are sons of God." (Rom. 8:14)

The Holy Spirit leads us in a daily walk, showing us where we should go, what we should do, and what we should learn. Therefore the more attentive to His voice we become, the more we'll grow in wisdom and understanding. We must pursue wisdom and can't get anywhere in our walks without it. Yet as we walk, we must remain submissive to the Holy Spirit, and He will lead us to the wisest outcome.

God is a relational God and won't drop wisdom in our laps. We must pursue it and seek to become sound through His wisdom. Being relational, He requires us to seek it with our whole hearts. As it is written,

> "My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding; Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding, If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk uprightly." (Prov. 2:1–7)

In pursuing wisdom it shows our hearts to God. If we love Him, we will want to grow in Him. Remember that we must love Him with all our minds. Therefore we should seek a deeper understanding of Him through the word of God.

Know the Word and Wisdom of God and Live by It

Dive head first into the Scriptures, and do not merely read them. Bibles are for studying and not reading only. So study your Bible faithfully and diligently. Yet as we study it, we must seek the truth. We must know exactly what the word is telling us that we can apply it as God intended. Wisdom is not wisdom unless it is the accurate application of truthful knowledge. As it is written,

> “O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace be with you. Amen.” (1 Tim. 6:20–21)

If we don’t seek truthful knowledge, then we make ourselves fools. We must be fervent to seek wisdom for what it really is and live by it.

When reading the word, look for the things that jump out at you. This is the Holy Spirit speaking to you, and these parts of the Scriptures will be useful and practical for your life. Study these sections and memorize them. Ask God to help you retain the Scriptures, and have faith that He will.

Before reading, pray that God will make the pages come alive and that He’d show you where He wants you to read. Then pray that He’d open your eyes and give you revelation as to what He wants you to know for your walk.

Listen intently to the Holy Spirit as you read. He is the source of wisdom, and we must pay careful attention to how He leads us through the Scriptures. By listening to Him in the word, it will help us to discern His voice in other areas of life as well.

When we sit in the council of the wise, we gain wisdom. If we make it a habit to sit in the Spirit, listen to His voice, and obey Him, we likewise will be made wise. Everything that the Lord does is wise. When we obey Him, we act in the power and soundness of God’s wisdom.

Indeed, we are called to have the mind of Christ. The only way to have this is to continue daily in His Holy Spirit. If we don’t continue in the Spirit, it will cause us to walk foolishly in the flesh. Sin will become a pattern, and we’ll be dragged down by the world.

We won’t always feel dragged down, but our walk with Christ will be whether we realize it or not. We must wholeheartedly devote ourselves to God to walk in His Spirit that we may grow and become like Him.

We don’t become like the Lord through merely reading the Scriptures and trying to apply them. Rather, we are like the Lord when we read the word and let the Spirit show us how to practice the word on a moment-by-moment basis.

We have to be sensitive to His voice to live by it. This is more than reading our Bibles but obeying the conviction of the Spirit. As we said

before, so now I say again: if we don't live by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, what then are we living by? Is it sin to say that we must live by the word and leading of the Spirit? Is He incapable of directing our steps rightly on a moment–by-moment basis? Faith comes by the word of God. If we don't listen to God's words through His Spirit, we are no longer walking by faith. Whatever is not from faith is sin. As we read,

> "…for whatever is not from faith is sin." (Rom. 14:23)

Walking in God's word is not a path we seek to force our way through. It is a path we are led down as we seek to practice it with a faithful heart. As we also read,

"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." Rom 8:14

If we are not led by the Spirit, we aren't walking by faith. Faith comes from His word expressed to us in the Bible and actively through His voice. For whenever God opens His mouth, we are required to have faith, even as Abraham did. If we aren't walking in the faith, we aren't walking in the Spirit but in the flesh. Those that walk in the flesh walk contrary to God.

We all do this from time to time, but there is a difference between someone who stumbles occasionally and someone who willfully walks according to their own heart, ignoring the Holy Spirit constantly.

But that walking in the flesh is contrary to the Lord is evident. For we read,

> "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." (Rom. 8:5–7)

The carnal mind is the mind of foolishness. The mind of the Spirit is the wise mind of Christ that we must always walk in. In order to walk in the Spirit, we need to press forward in our efforts to hear the Holy Spirit continually while practicing the convictions and words of the Spirit. But in this, we must be careful to discern His voice that we can live by it. For our

own hearts deceive us, and sometimes we think that we hear God because we want to hear His voice so badly. Also, Satan will step in due to desire to stir up our hearts through deceit.

He will mimic God's voice, and we are called to discern who we're hearing from. If we're swallowed up by desire, then we will not likely discern the devil has spoken—seeing that he entices our desires. But if we keep a sober heart, God's voice will be easier to discern. If we wait patiently, we will hear His voice in truth to walk according to it.

If we do not walk according to it, then we will walk in the sin of the flesh. The wages of sin are death. If we walk in sin, not merely stumbling but continuously walk in it, we will walk in the paths of death. For we are warned accordingly,

> "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." (Rom. 8:12–13)

We must walk in the Spirit and cannot justify our sins. Repentance suggests that we will walk contrary to the pattern of sin. Therefore, Beloved, walk not only in grace but in victory by continuously walking in the Holy Spirit. For we read,

> "And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." (Gal. 5:24–25)

We are exhorted to walk in the Spirit because it doesn't always come naturally to do so. Although we live in the Spirit, it doesn't always mean we walk in the Spirit. When we sin, we are taking our steps in the flesh. Let us not continue in this pattern but crucify the flesh and persist in the Spirit. Although we stumble, God gave us the power to overcome them through walking in the Spirit. As we read,

> "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." (Gal. 5:16)

Therefore walk in the Spirit. It doesn't happen naturally, so be serious

about it and press into it. We walk in the Spirit when we hear God's voice and obey. So carefully listen for the still, small whisper, discern it properly, and live by it.

Jesus calls us to both live in Him and continue in Him. Even as He said,

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

'I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

'As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.'"
(John 15:4–9)

The original Greek word for abide is 'menσ.' This word doesn't merely mean to live in a dwelling place but also means "to continue" or "continue in the presence of." In this, Jesus is calling us to continue to meditate on His daily abiding presence, to listen to His voice, and to continue to obey it.

This word is also used for saying "abide in a path." To abide in a path isn't to set up a hut and live on the road itself. It means "to continue along the course of." Quite simply, Jesus isn't merely calling us to have the Holy Spirit but also to continually walk in Him and in His love. Let's reread the verse at this time, and rather than using the word "abide," exchange it for the proper word "continue."

By our doing this it will open our eyes to the meaning behind the Scripture and will give us further revelation.

"Continue in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it continues in the vine, neither can you, unless you continue in Me.

'I am the vine, you are the branches. He who continues in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not continue in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you continue in Me, and My words continue in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall

be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

'As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; continue in My love.'"

Again, this word means to both "live in" as well as "continue in." This isn't merely a call to continue to be a Christian but to continually walk in Christ. For some believers do not walk as they ought. God calls us to continue in Him and live in Him as a branch lives in a vine. A branch that doesn't continue in the vine withers. Likewise, we will wither if we don't continue to walk in God's Spirit.

Jesus is calling us to continually seek Him in His word, continue in His Spirit, and continue to deepen our relationship with Him. A call to continue in Christ is a call to continuously live for Him. As logical as that may seem, sometimes we forget to do this due to the distractions of life. Yet we must remember to be faithful and dive headfirst into the love of God.

If we love the Lord, we will spend as much time with Him as we can. We know that we should have daily devotions, but we also need to remember to seek Him constantly throughout the day. Commit to prayer at every moment, even while you work. The world can easily drag you down. But if you diligently focus on the Lord and pray at every opportunity, His Spirit will strengthen you to continue in Him and continue to be the example of Christ's love.

As we read,

> "Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples!
>
> Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works!
>
> Glory in His holy name; Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD!
>
> Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face evermore!
>
> Remember His marvelous works which He has done, His wonders, and the judgments of His mouth." (Ps. 105:1–5)

This Scripture is calling us to constantly reflect on the Lord. Reflect on Him in the way you live and in the way you communicate with others. By continuously reflecting on Him, we draw nearer to Him. The closer we are to Him, the more we will understand His heart. The more we understand the

ways of God, the wiser we will be.

Practice the habitual pursuit of wisdom. Be established in it, and walk according to His Spirit's leading. Draw near to the Lord continually, and read His word. Understand your Bible, and study it faithfully. Let your heart reflect God's as you grow in and absorb His love.

HABIT FOUR

PURSUIT OF TRUTH

TRUTH IS THE center of who Christ is, and we are called to always be seeking it; not merely in truth telling, but in our doctrine and the way we approach God and practice His word in life. To habitually pursue the truth is to habitually seek the heart of the Lord. For we read,

> "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" John 14:6

Jesus is truth, and to make a lifelong commitment to pursue truth is to commit yourself to Christ. Now, pursuing truth is more than just truth telling but rather coming to a full knowledge of perfect doctrine, for we must walk in and believe the truth of our doctrine. For there are many doctrines that are subtly contrary to the truth in Christ although they don't appear to be on the surface. These are due to personal interpretations made over generations and ingrained into the minds of Christians generation after generation.

Doctrine is important because it dictates what we place our faith in. If we put our faith in a lie about Jesus, does it help our walks and growth in Him? Certainly not! Thus if we desire to draw nearer to Him and become the example of Him in all we say and do, we must pursue the truth.

Anything that dictates our faith is of the utmost importance because our faith saves us. As we read,

> "For by grace you have been saved through faith…" (Eph. 2:8)

If our faith saves us but we trust in lies, it is more than obvious that it profits us nothing. Therefore the scriptures exhort us,

> "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you." (1 Tim. 4:16)

In as much as faith saves us, so doctrine does as well. For if it determines what we're putting our faith in, then it is certain that pure doctrine saves while false doctrine does not. Our faith must be in the truth about Christ and not lies that Satan and men have cleverly crafted over the past two thousand years.

Being Christ's, we must make it our priority to seek and live by the truth. If we love the Lord, we will seek to know Him for who He is. In this, doctrine becomes necessary. Now, one may ask, "How do we find truth?" But the answer lies within you. As we read,

> "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth…" (John 16:13)

Turn your ears inwardly to the Holy Spirit, and listen intently to His voice. Remember that we read,

> "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Num. 23:19)

Therefore everything God says will be in truth and lead you to life. Listen carefully to His voice, and learn to interpret it accurately. Don't assume you already know what is right. If there are any scriptures that others use to contradict what you believe, then come silently before God. Let His Spirit speak to you as you choose to have an open mind.

For by having an open mind, you will be teachable rather than assuming you know the full answer. Remember that we can't grow unless we remain humble. Now, when these scriptures contradict our understanding, it doesn't mean we're entirely wrong but that there's a bigger picture above the seeming contradiction that we're not fully understanding. Then having come to the Lord, He reveals truth to us, and we grow in wisdom. Hence the pursuit

of truth and wisdom go hand in hand.

When you understand the Lord's voice and keep a humble heart, you'll grow swiftly in doctrine. Yet be careful in how you pursue doctrine. God gave us many elders to lead us in the word. Yet there are a few people who will lead you astray; not intentionally, but because they have been led astray on an issue of doctrine, they'll exhort you to believe the same. Yet if the Spirit is telling you something different and you know it's the Lord, then believe Him instead. Sometimes He will speak things that don't always make sense to us; this is why we need to pray for wisdom and that He would lead us through the Scriptures that we may understand them.

Then as you become familiar with the Lord's voice, you will be able to tell when He is speaking to you and teaching you through an elder or if it's their flesh. Listen to God in the man and not the man himself. But anyone you hear the Lord teaching you through you ought to have automatic respect for and humble yourself. For the Lord intends to use that person to grow you. Therefore be humble, not for their sake but for your sake, that you may hear the Lord and grow.

Knowing that the Spirit leads us to truth, we must make ourselves more sensitive to His voice. Focus on Him daily, and listen intently to Him. Obey and believe Him always, and settle it in your heart neither to question Him nor do your own thing. Sometimes we feel subtly convicted to do something only to be subtly tempted to question, "Why wouldn't God be okay with this or that?" These are the sins in the small things that catch us without our realizing it. This issue is that we aren't discerning the two voices and where they are from (temptation and subtle conviction). But if we're paying attention to what and who we're hearing inwardly and properly discern it, then it will be easy to understand and follow the Holy Spirit.

But that we must follow the Spirit is evident. For as we stated previously,

> "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." (Rom. 8:14)

And again,

> "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." (Gal.

5:18)

If we follow the Spirit and work according to His leading, we are justified. For in this, we are not living by works but obedience. Indeed, we ought to listen to God and obey Him always. When we listen to His voice, we walk in Him. When we walk in the Spirit, we are empowered to overcome all things. As it is also written,

> "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." (Gal. 5:16)

And also,

> "I have written to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one." (1 John 2:14)

Let the word of God dwell in you richly and be obedient to the Spirit. In this, we overcome the wicked one, who holds sway over the world. As we read,

> "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one." (1 John 5:19)

Seeing that we have overcome the wicked one through obedience to God's word, we also have overcome the world because greater is He who is in you than He who is in the world. As it is written,

> "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." (1 John 4:4)

Submit to the Spirit, and follow His voice. Discern the doctrine through His leading, and grow in it. Read the word, and look at all the scriptures together in their entirety.

Some people teach based off several similar scriptures while playing down others that contradict their teaching. Watch for this. When others discuss doctrine but then come to a verse that is contrary to what they teach,

they'll say, "God didn't really mean this when He said it; He meant this instead." Don't pass this off, but let it be a red flag of false doctrine.

If the word of God is inerrant and infallible, then why doesn't it say exactly what the teacher is saying? If God really meant to say something else, then why didn't He just say it? But such a person will go on to justify their standpoint through logic in regard to their doctrine: "Besides seeing that this or that is true, why would God say this?"

They'll leave out bits and pieces of the chapter, prior verses, or verses that come afterward to justify their doctrine. But if their doctrine were true, then every verse of the Bible would line up with what they're saying. If there is a seeming contradiction, they'll be able to use the contradiction in line with another verse using the same context that both were written without the need of human logic to prove their point.

There are many brethren that don't do this. Rather, they use logic, only know half-truths, and think they know the full answers. Then because they think they know the truth, they get prideful, teach others, and cannot be rebuked.

Watch for these, and do not allow your heart to be led astray by them. Avoid those that can't be rebuked. They will lead you astray through their influence, as we read in the Scriptures. If you think you're too strong for that, then due to pride, you'll fall.

Everyone can be influenced by those they're closest to. Avoid those that hate truth, and cling to those that preach it. Help them spread the word, and bring other brothers and sisters to listen to them. If everyone does this, it will increase the influence of the truth. This greatly pleases God and results in a blessing for you. For by this, you'll be turning others to righteousness. And as we read,

> "For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." (3 John 3–4)

And also,

> "Those who are wise shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, And those who turn many to righteousness Like the

stars forever and ever." (Daniel 12:3)

Turn others to righteousness in truth. If the truth is in a preacher, then turn your brethren to him for their sake. This will please the Lord as you seek to spread the truth, and in this, God will be glorified.

God desires to lead each of us by His Spirit to understand His doctrine. He didn't write His word to be a mystery to everyone. He wrote it to reveal it to His children, and this revelation comes through the Holy Spirit. As we read,

> "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God." (1 Cor. 2:10–11)

Therefore, listen to the Spirit, and be swift to obey Him. But that God leads us to understand His doctrine is evident. For we also read,

> "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." (1 John 5:20)

Live according to the true God, and pursue Him in truth. When we love someone, we will seek to know them for who they are. Likewise, if you love the Lord, then seek Him for who He is, and do not settle for others' interpretations.

Read the word, and if two verses appear to contradict, don't brush it off as some have a habit of doing. Rather, be one who habitually seeks the truth in these things. When you can understand the full context, it will strengthen your faith and walk in Christ. As Jesus said,

> "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31–32)

Be set free by a greater understanding. Come to complete knowledge,

and look at things for what they are. If a Scripture appears to contradict another, there is a greater meaning above the supposed contradiction. If you brush it off, then you'll be led to an improper conclusion. Therefore take it to heart to seek the truth.

Do not be led by your own heart. God's opinion is all that matters, not our own. Our opinions don't save us or others. God doesn't want us sharing our thoughts on the Scriptures. He wants us to speak the truth of the gospel coming from perfect knowledge.

If you don't have that perfect knowledge, then be diligent to seek it, and be passionate for it. If you love the Lord, you'll love Him for who He is and not who you want Him to be. But if you interpret the word in your own heart, you will be led astray.

For it is written,

> "The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9)

And also,

> "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death." (James 1:14–15)

Our own heart deceives us, and Satan plays on our desires to entice us to sin. Lies and false doctrine are sin. If we cast off the truth of the Scriptures, then we sin.

For doctrine dictates our faith and what we place it in. Knowing then that we are saved by faith, we ought to diligently seek the truth of the doctrine. If our faith isn't in truth, how can we be saved? Those that form their own opinions and live by them create a different god out of the one true God. While they use His name, they are creating a false image of the visage of Christ.

But those that diligently seek the truth will be established in doctrine and faith. Now, if our faith isn't established in truth, then we sin. Why? Because we aren't having faith in God but a different god whom others craft using the name of our God.

This situation is a disturbing reality, and it's plaguing the church today.

Everyone forms their own opinions and lives by them. They think God is okay with it and doesn't care because He has grace. Yet if we aren't having faith in the truth, then, in truth, we aren't living by faith at all. How then can we expect God to be pleased with us when it's written,

> "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." (Heb. 11:6)

If you love the Lord, then diligently seek Him for who He is. Live by true faith, and honor Him in your faith. For if you live according to a lie, then your faith is false. God isn't pleased by this but requires us to diligently seek the truth and live according to it. But if you do not have faith as you ought, then you sin. As we read,

> "…for whatever is not from faith is sin." (Rom. 14:23)

Again, whatever is not from faith is *sin*. We can't expect to be saved unless we have faith in truth. If we jump in front of a semi, will God save us just because we have faith? If we put ourselves in that situation without God's direction, then obviously not. While it may sound extreme, it really is similar to having upright doctrine. Remember that,

> "…faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Rom. 10:17)

Knowing that faith comes from His word, we must wait for Him to speak that we can be led by His word, in which we have faith. If God *tells* us to step in front of a semi, perhaps to save another person's life, and if He *tells* us that we will not die or be hurt, then we will be safe through faith.

Obviously God isn't going to tell us to do this. But this is similar to doctrine. Some people think that if they have enough faith in something, they'll be saved. This is a doctrine coming from the world! "If you believe in anything hard enough, it will happen for you!" Hence the Disney song "When You Wish upon a Star."

No matter how hard you believe something, *it is not going to happen if your faith is not in the truth!* Yet some Christians don't take this to heart. They feel that it doesn't matter if their doctrine is a little wrong, because God

has grace. Yet we are required to pursue truth and not sit complacently without it. We must be fervent for it. For Jesus is the truth, and to seek the truth in our doctrine is to seek Jesus for who He is.

So much like the semi, if our faith in that situation isn't in the truth, then our faith won't save us. Common sense tells us that if we do anything outside God's word, it's foolish. So why do some try to do things outside God's voice, which *is* His word? When God speaks, we are required to have faith.

We are led by His voice, and His voice is His word. Remember that the written word was once spoken to men by God as they wrote the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit spoke inwardly and inclined each man to write the exact words they wrote. Thus we know that His word is infallible. As we read,

> "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

And also,

> "knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:20–21)

God wrote His word through men. Even as this Scripture says, we must not interpret the word but live by its one true meaning. Every Scripture is from God to us, and we are required to believe in all of them. Yet His written word was once His spoken word. The Bible and the voice of the Holy Spirit are on equal ground. One is not above the other, but both must be obeyed equally; from both we find true faith.

We know that the Spirit leads us to truth and that we are required to have faith in the things God tells us to do. Therefore if you want to lead a faith-filled life, become more sensitive to His voice and live by it. Learn to discern it that you may know that you're following God and not your own heart.

No matter how much you believe in something, if God didn't tell you it would come to pass, it won't. It's funny how sometimes we make having faith in God to be about ourselves. "Maybe if I have more faith, this or that would happen." Yet if God didn't speak it, then it won't happen. Like we said before, this thinking comes from a doctrine of the world: "If you believe anything hard enough, it will happen." Indeed, this is a happy, fluffy thought but not reality. The only things that come to pass, in regard to faith, are those that the Lord makes happen. Therefore we must wait for His word. Thereafter we know that the situation will produce a miracle because God's hand is working in it.

Thus if we put our faith in lies, it does not save us. Many that are not born again believe that they can live their worldly lives without repentance and still be saved because God is an all loving God. Yet is this true? We know that Jesus said,

> "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'
>
> Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?'
>
> Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.'" John 3:3–6

We know this, and because we placed our faith in the truth, we found salvation. But one who never received Christ as Savior picks various verses of the Bible and justifies their standpoint by them. Are they then saved if they believe with all their heart that they can live in sin and still enter heaven? Certainly not!

Therefore, when we examine our foundation and elementary beginnings in Christ, it is more than obvious that all our faith must be in God's perfect truth. Satan knows this, which is why he seeks to lead both the believer and unbeliever astray through false doctrine. As we read,

> "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience

seared with a hot iron." (1 Tim. 4:1–2)

The Holy Spirit has expressly said that many will turn from the faith to follow after the lies of Satan. These doctrines are not in regard to false gods but a false portrayal of Jesus. Satan, in the past, led men astray through false gods. Now, rolling with the times, the devil disrupts the peace of the church through gentle contortions of the nature, character, and doctrine of Jesus. By this method the devil has crept into the church. As we read,

> "For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. But I want to remind you, though you once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe." (Jude 1:4–5)

Open your eyes and perceive. Satan is always working to deceive you, and lies abound all around you. Every church in the world has false doctrine in it through one person or another, and we must take this seriously. False doctrine isn't treated the way it should be: as a nasty poison that must be eradicated.

Many kings of old have been killed by 99% food and 1% poison. Similarly, Satan uses 99% truth and 1% lie to turn us astray. Consider that if you turn the rudder of a ship only a fraction of a degree it can throw you off course over a great distance. Imagine a ship traveling from California to Hawaii. If its rudder is turned only a small amount, it will miss paradise altogether unless it has a course correction.

Likewise, we must always correct our course in Christ that we can walk in the soundness of wisdom. That way we will not miss Paradise but enter into it perfectly. For no one can be saved except through faith in Jesus Christ. As we read,

> "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" (John 14:6)

We can only enter through faith in Jesus, not contorted images of Him but the truth of Him. For faith in demonic doctrine does not save us but rather

condemns us. Although God has grace, if we don't take it seriously to seek truth, then our blood is on our own head. God looks at the heart. If a person doesn't seek the truth but is complacent, then they aren't serious about their relationship with Christ. But those that are serious will seek Him for who He is and will seek to please Him in truth. Those that please God in truth have complete confidence that God is happy with their actions. They don't have doubts or fears, because they know *EXACTLY* what pleases God. Whereas those that don't seek the truth try to please God and hope He is pleased without actually knowing. They say, "I believe God is pleased with me." But if they'd listen to the Holy Spirit, they'd know whether He is or isn't. Hence God would call us to know what we are doing and to be fully aware of our actions.

If we seek the truth and believe a lie, won't God turn us around and give us grace? Indeed He will, but we must have a commitment to know Jesus for who He really is. We have free will. God doesn't force us to do right or wrong or else we wouldn't have sin. If we don't have this commitment to truth, Satan will lead us astray little by little. One percent lie here and 1% lie there will lead us to be 100% wrong in the end.

The devil stirs up your heart based on things you already desire. This makes it easy for him to lead you astray. But if you continue in self-awareness, as we discussed previously, and compare your heart to God's, you'll know when you're being tempted. Then it will be easy to overcome temptation and walk in truth.

Knowing these things, pay attention to your heart and compare it to the Lord. Listen carefully to the Spirit, and follow His words faithfully. He will lead you into all truth. Not partial truth, not half-truths, but *all truth*. As we stated earlier,

> "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth…" (John 16:13)

Submit to the Holy Spirit. Take your walk seriously, and be careful not to be led astray. God has grace, but this isn't an excuse for us to cast off the needful pursuit of the truth. If we know we should take His words seriously, then we must be faithful to obey them. For Jesus warned us,

> “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.” (Matt. 7:24–27)

If our walks are not founded in Christ, we risk collapse. Let us not be overtaken in Judgment. For when He judges us, if we haven’t built on the truth, we will suffer loss. As it is written,

> “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” (1 Cor. 3:11–17)

Although He has grace, He gives it to those that seek Him for it. You can’t expect God to be okay with complacency. Let’s be faithful and have a fervent heart for Him. If we live according to lies and false doctrine, we are not saved. Even as it is written,

> “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19–20)

Take this to heart and be fervent for the truth. When you’ve grown in it, be faithful to turn others to it as well. Don’t let anyone defile your temple, but

keep purity in Christ's truth. Be circumspect to those around you.

Discern the truth in Christ, and as He teaches you, pay attention to who is founded in truth and who isn't. When you have grown, gently guide others to truth. When you find the truth, there will be some who will exhort you to unify with your church. Every church has its own doctrine and set of core beliefs, and we must be certain to found ourselves in Christ and Him alone.

We need to be careful not to cling to various church doctrines but to be on a constant quest for the truth. Even if an unbeliever were to pursue the truth about the Lord and the meaning of life, they would find Christ. For Christ is the truth. How much more so should we continuously pursue the truth for what it is and live it out? Do not let the church define your walk but rather allow Christ to.

Yes, we have been given pastors to guide us, and you should listen to their teachings. However, a quest for truth is a reminder to grow in your personal relationship with the Lord. Pastors that are appointed by God speak and teach as the Holy Spirit guides them. In this, God is teaching you through the man and not the man himself. Discern when God is speaking to you through them. You know His voice, so sit forward in your seat when He does and take the pastor's words to heart, for they are from God.

Now, there are many churches with various doctrines. Due to the non-profit requirements, the government has a subtle influence on the church in that it forces non-profits to have a core statement of beliefs. The issue is that sometimes those that founded the church may be incorrect about one of the statements. Then they go on to cling to these beliefs, which are not truth, and teach others to do likewise. Hence we should not follow the church doctrine but Christ's doctrine.

It's dangerous to follow church doctrine because our faith must be in truth. Some churches are adamant on their beliefs even if they later find out there is a biblical basis for them to be wrong. Such a person leads others astray and exhorts them to put their faith in the church doctrine as well saying, "This is the closest thing to truth; live it and believe it." We ought not to be putting our faith in the "closest thing" but rather in the exact truth. While it sounds good to have the closest thing to truth, it still isn't truth. No matter how close to truth it is, if it isn't 100% truth, then it isn't true at all. With truth, there is no grey area. It is either perfect truth or a lie.

So to say that they have the “closest thing” is to admit that there are false doctrines in the statement of beliefs. There is no “closest thing.” There is either perfect truth or false doctrine. Remember that the way is narrow. Stay on the straight and narrow, and don’t be turned aside to idle teachings. Therefore allow the Lord to teach you truth, and be sensitive to His voice.

When churches are founded, the elders come together and agree on core beliefs. They may also stretch out beyond a statement of beliefs and keep a more in-depth church doctrine to adhere to. This doctrine will detail how they will run the church and how members should conduct themselves daily.

In this, they will itemize the entire doctrine of Christ. This won’t be available to everyone except at the pulpit, but the elders all get paperwork regarding the doctrine. When they plant other churches, they will also hand the leaders of the daughter church a print-off of the doctrine to adhere to, as to facilitate unity of teaching and mind. While this may sound good, the problem is that in some cases, the doctrine is wrong. But for unity’s sake, they will still try to adhere to it, even though they know better.

Watch out for these people. They know they’re preaching false doctrine and refuse to stop. They know they’re doing wrong but justify it by claiming that there are greater goods.

Nothing can be greater than God’s perfect good. Although we are called to be unified in the same mind, we certainly shouldn’t be unified in what we know to be a lie. Such people are false teachers and must be avoided at all costs. Beware of false teachers and do not have anything to do with them or their churches. As it is written,

> “Therefore ‘Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.’” (2 Cor. 6:17)

And again,

> “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” (2 John 1:9–11)

It cannot be any more plain. If we so much as greet such a person, we share in their evil deeds. Onlookers may believe you have an agreement with them and thus will listen to them and be led astray due to your simple handshake. Obey God and do not touch what is unclean. If you know someone walks in sin, then keep your hand to yourself and do not speak to them.

Do you really want to share in their deeds? What happens to those that speak against the truth? What do we read?

> "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed." (Gal. 1:6–9)

This original word for accursed is "anathema." This is the most horrible and nasty type of cursing anyone can receive. It is the word used to loosely describe eternal condemnation and the eternal fire. So the Bible is saying that any person that perverts the doctrine is eternally condemned.

Do you really want to share in their deeds? Be careful to remain pure. As it is also written,

> "Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure." (1 Tim. 5:22)

Now, if you want to be a teacher, be one who dedicates yourself wholeheartedly to the truth. Labor in the doctrine and so receive greater honor. As it is written,

> "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, *especially those who labor in the word and doctrine*." (1 Tim. 5:17)

But the word of God exhorts us not to become a teacher too swiftly. For it is also written,

> “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” (James 3:1)

What kind of judgment is this? Do we receive fewer blessings or condemnation? For we read that a bishop must not be a novice. As it is written,

> “not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.” (1 Tim. 3:6)

Why does this happen to a novice? Because they don’t know anything about the faith. Then due to pride over being a teacher, they are no longer teachable or able to be rebuked. In the end, they refuse to repent of false doctrine due to pride then move on to become false teachers teaching the false doctrines of demons.

Who then can teach safely? One who attunes their ears to the Holy Spirit and is led in the things they teach and do. They must grow to a full discernment of the Spirit and walk in Him. If you are led by the Spirit, there is no condemnation, only justification. Even so there will be a greater reward. For Jesus said,

“Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

> ‘For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.’” (Matt. 25:28–29)

A teacher is meant to be the example of the believer. Every believer ought to have a walk like a teacher and full knowledge of the faith. Remember that it is *your* relationship with the Lord, so grow in it to the fullest.

We need to live according to God’s word and strive according to His work. As we read,

> “To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.” (Col. 1:29)

Many people try paving their own paths in Christ. Rather, we ought to

remain submissive to the leading in the Spirit. Remember that He leads to all truth. If you surrender to His voice, you will always be led to truth and the perfect outcome.

The Nature of Truth

Now let's take a more in-depth look at the truth itself. As it is written,

"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

> Stand therefore, *having girded your waist with* truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness." (Eph. 6:13–14)

The original Greek word for "girding your waist" is perizōnnumi, which can literally mean "to put a belt on."

This armor belt in Roman tradition was used for three primary reasons. The first is that it held a dagger, whereas the sword was slung around the shoulder. The dagger could be used to protect the soldier if the sword were lost. Thus the belt (of truth) complemented the sword (which is the word of God). Hence the truth complements the word of God. To sum it up, if you're in any situation where you can't hear God to know His word, then you have the biblical truths to lean on. Remember that the sword isn't merely the Bible but the "sword of the Spirit" or, that is to say, the word of God, both the Bible and inwardly spoken voice of the Spirit.

The second reason for the belt was that the belt was a symbol of the soldier's honor. They wore decorative metal plates of brass, bronze, or silver around the belt with other decorative metal plates that hung down at the groin. The plates on the belt protected it from slashing thus keeping the soldier from losing their dagger. Also, the various plates served as a symbol of the soldier's wealth.

The soldiers kept these decorations on their belt to serve as both a symbol of societal status as well as for honor. When a soldier finished their service to their country, they would pass the belt down to a youth that was training for the military, thus perpetuating the honor.

The third reason the belt was used was for supporting the breastplate. The belt itself served as the foundation for the breastplate, without which the

breastplate would be too heavy of a burden to bear. The belt fastened the breastplate to the hips so that the weight was evenly distributed on the hips and the shoulders, thus making it easier to carry and maneuver in battle.

The breastplate was righteousness, and the belt was truth. By this we learn that the foundation of righteousness is the truth in doctrine, and without the truth, we cannot carry righteousness. Thus if we do not walk in the truth of the Gospel, we will not walk in righteousness. For God's word is in truth and must be practiced according to the original meaning that God meant when He spoke it.

Also, the truth of the Gospel, the true doctrine found in Jesus Christ, should be the wealth and honor of the church. It should always be on full display like the Roman's decorations.

In Roman tradition, when an officer wanted to discipline a soldier, he would force him to wear a scarf around his belt to hide his honor. It was a greatly humiliating act in that the soldier was forced to stand before all men without honor.

Likewise, we should be humiliated when the truth is not present with us. If we don't know whether we have the truth or not, we should be humiliated and seek it lest we walk in a lie and not the heart of Jesus, whom we love.

We should rightly display the truth in doctrine while contending for the faith. The truth is our high honor and should be searched out by the believer until it is fully realized in their life. But the scarf that wraps it is false doctrine. For when the truth is shrouded in a lie, it is to the humiliation of both the believer and the entire church.

But can a believer truly come to the full knowledge of the truth? What do we read, and where does truth come from?

> "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into *all* truth…" (John 16:13)

The Holy Spirit and His leading are the center of all our truth. For when we are led by Him, He leads us into *ALL* truth. Not partial truth, not half-truths, but all the truth in all its entirety.

It doesn't take a lifetime to find truth nor is truth granted to us little by little, generation after generation, until the church fully realizes it. Rather, the Spirit of God leads each individual to the truth in their lifetime, reasonably,

for their salvation. Therefore we should take His voice seriously, for God cannot lie. Whenever He opens His mouth, all His words are truth, life, and perfection.

If then we seek to honor the Lord, we ought to pursue the truth in our doctrine with our whole hearts by the leading of the Holy Spirit. And how are we led by the Spirit? By His voice. When He speaks, He guides us with His words. God cannot lie. Therefore when He speaks, He leads us into all truth. The more sensitive to His voice you become and the more you obey Him, the more you'll walk in truth.

Also, it is by His truth that we are purified, and through the truth we are set free. As it is written,

> "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'" (John 8:31–32)

And again,

> "Since you have *purified your souls in obeying the truth* through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart." (1 Peter 1:22)

If then you want to be pure in Christ, you must seek the truth. For what does the word say? "You have purified your souls through obeying the truth." Therefore obey the truth, and walk in it. For by the truth you will purify your soul. Seek it with all your heart. Make it your habit to live by pure doctrine and not your own opinion or that of others.

Let God speak for Himself, and let Him communicate His truth to you. Every relationship requires a solid foundation of good communication. Therefore grow as a listener that God can communicate His heart with you more effectively.

As you read the Bible, be sensitive to the Spirit's voice, and He will guide you through the pages. By practicing listening to God, it will carry over into other categories of life as well. You will be able to hear Him more clearly through life and know His will with greater accuracy, not only because you have an accurate understanding of the Bible but also because you can hear the Holy Spirit more clearly. He will explain to you the Father's

will and how to apply the Scriptures on a moment-by-moment basis.

Remain submissive to Him, and you will walk in the purity of truth. Share this truth with others and so purify their souls as well.

As we stated earlier,

> "Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins." (James 5:19–20)

Make it your habit to live by God's truth. Be fervent for it. Remember that Josiah became most fervent when the word of truth entered his heart. Let God's word sink down into your heart, and apply it practically through love and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Be careful of those that are told the truth but refuse to apply it. For it is written,

> "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." (Rom. 1:18)

For those that do not seek the truth but justify their opinions are speaking for God. Such people are not led by His Spirit and thus are under judgment. To those that do such it is written that they are,

> "…treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who 'will render to each one according to his deeds': eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; *but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath.*" (Rom. 2:5—8)

Do not be complacent and do not be self-seeking, but seek the truth and be fervent for it. For by the truth, we are purified in Christ. Therefore, love fervently and obey the truth through following the Holy Spirit.

HABIT FIVE

AVID LISTENER

A RELATIONSHIP IS FORMED when two hearts join. Seeing that our hearts are the foundation of our relationships, how we communicate them determines how good our relationships will be.

A listening ear is better than an open mouth. Communication is done best not by speaking but by listening to another person's heart. When two people are in love, they share their hearts with each other. Because they love one another, they absorb each other's words and enjoy them. Think of the star struck girl that sits listening to every word her crush speaks to her. So it is with everyone that is deeply in love. They listen intently because every word their partner speaks means so much to them.

Similarly, let it be so in all your relationships. By listening more and talking less, it will change your relationships and bless them in ways you couldn't imagine. Your children will respect you more because you give them respect and allow them to share and express their hearts. Your spouse will respect you more because you receive their heart. People like to share their hearts with a receptive person. So be receptive, and watch it change your world around you.

Your boss will respect you more because you pay attention to his or her word and apply it. Your coworkers and neighbors will respect you more because you care about their situations in life. Granted, we should be discerning in our conversations, seeking to abstain from idle chatter. Yet we should listen to a pouring heart and minister Christ to each of these. If you

can’t minister Christ to someone’s heart in any situation, then you probably shouldn’t be in that situation.

When we listen better, it helps us understand what we’re being told. By listening more, it gives us the opportunity to leave a more thoughtful reply. Then by the combination of a loving ear and a thoughtful mouth, people will be drawn to you naturally.

We, being human and flawed, are naturally selfish people. We generally like to share our own thoughts before hearing someone else’s. But a person is closer to a listener than a talker. Even our children are closer to us when we hear them out.

A commander talks while a soldier listens. Sometimes without realizing it, we act this way toward our children, spouses, coworkers, friends/acquaintances or employees. We expect them to hear us out and do what we say without listening to them. If we have this thought process, then when we’re exhorted by an elder to be a better listener, it really means to us “wait for the other person to talk, but don’t think about what they’re saying; rather, think about what I’m going to say next.”

Or in other words, being a better listener will really mean being a more patient speaker. But God doesn’t call us to only express our own hearts. We are called to cherish and nurture that of others as well. If we are only interested in what we have to say, we won’t care about the details of their heart.

When we have this mentality, we tend to reply using words without knowledge. To listen suggests that we will actually think about the words we’re hearing, take them into account, and weigh them in our hearts. Yet too many of us would rather be heard than hear others.

We should first hear someone out, then be heard. When we show them the courtesy of listening to and weighing their words, they’ll usually repay us with the same. If ever you’ve wanted people to care about what you’re saying, consider their words first. Remember that you reap what you sow. Knowing this, consider them before yourself. Listen to their hearts, then leave thoughtful replies. In times to come, they will respect your words and desire to hear you out because you add meaning to them.

Such people with the commander type personality have a tendency to criticize another’s point of view rather than adding to it. Be careful not to be

one who merely criticizes but rather augment. Start with their point of view and add on to it. If they seem to be lacking complete knowledge in their statements, start with their level of understanding and bring them to a higher level. If you only criticize, you'll lose respect.

If people can't understand your logic, they won't look up to you for the intelligence you have. Rather, they'll question your every motive. Consider how teenagers act toward their parents. Some employers also see these similarities in their employees. Yet when we see issues in our relationships, our first response is to blame the other. "It's my child's fault; they have no respect for me!" Or "If those I supervise would just listen to me, we wouldn't have these problems!"

Relationships require humility—humility to admit that the fault isn't always with the other person. Many times when there's a break-down of communication, it isn't always the fault of the one listening. Rather, the one talking may not be conveying their point in a way the individual listener can understand.

If you want your relationships to change, never expect the other person to change. Either they'll suffer burn out from trying to meet your standards or they won't even try. When they don't try, we feel unloved. In the end, we'll feel emotionally burned out and hopeless that the relationship will get anywhere.

But every major change in life starts with smaller, gradual changes. These small changes are like baby steps. Remember that when an infant learns to walk, it takes small steps and stumbles. Similarly, when we begin seeking a life change, we won't experience it right away.

We live in an instant results society, where everything needs to happen immediately or we aren't satisfied. Have you ever been in a rush to get out the door and waited impatiently with your microwave? Consider what they did in the 1800s! The average dinner could take an hour or more to make, beginning with collecting the tinder to start the fire then getting it hot enough to cook over and finishing with a set table.

But today with our modern conveniences, our hearts have adapted to a life of impatience. When traffic clogs up, we get frustrated and angry. But back when there were only horses, it could have taken the better part of a day to go the same distance we go in an hour. We tap our foot in anticipation with

our microwaves. We complain to the fast food joint for taking ten minutes to prepare our food rather than two.

Impatience is a naturally occurring phenomenon in today's culture. Yet God tells us that patience is a fruit of the Spirit. If we put that fruit on full display, it causes us to stand out from the crowd. Patience appears as loving kindness in the eyes of the teenage fast food server that was late with your meal. Letting someone go ahead of you at the grocery store gives them a sigh of relief, only to cause them to turn around in confusion and say, "Are you sure!?" That one extra spot in the line can change their entire demeanor. Here they're being impatient to leave, then by showing them that simple act of kindness, their grief turns to joy.

These simple things mean more to us today in our fast-paced, impatient society. It seems bizarre and abnormal to the onlooker that we should be patient and give others the opportunity to fulfill their tasks and goals before we do.

Similarly, much patience is required when making any changes in your life. Like a planted seed, it takes time to grow. After all the hard work of pruning, fertilizing, and watering, the plant bears the fruit we desire. Yet that fruit only comes in small amounts at first only to create a satisfying amount later, sometimes years after the first fruit appears.

Consider that it could take a couple years of planting love to experience the fruit you want from someone else. Then it may take a few years more to see them change completely. Realize also that the seed required for this fruit is your own change. You need to change how you communicate your love to them and how you treat them before you can expect them to change by any degree.

Sometimes when we change our approach toward others, we get dissatisfied when they don't seem to change, much like making a commitment to diet and exercise. If we don't see the results we want in a few weeks, we start to give up. Then when we realize that it can take a full year to reach our goals, we get discouraged and dissatisfied.

Likewise, when we don't see someone change in our timeframe, we find ourselves on our knees: "God, it's been three weeks now! Three weeks and I don't see anything! This isn't working!" But these changes aren't something we can do by choice. They aren't something that may or may not

work for some.

They are God's requirements for us, and we have to do them. They are the blue prints to the most fulfilling life anyone could experience. We can't stop doing them just because we feel they don't work. We must do them because God requires us to walk in the fullness of love.

If we love the Lord, we should walk uprightly, sharing His love *His* way without regard for the other person's conduct. Remember that Jesus tells us to love our enemies. How much more should we love our friends and family while waiting patiently for our relationships to improve? If we would love our enemy regardless of their actions, then we should love those we're nearest to with the same, not regarding them as enemies but as needed assets of our hearts.

Let those you're nearest to know that they add something to your life by adding more to theirs. Be patient with them while you wait for them to do rightly, and focus on your own heart.

Let's recognize the planks in our own eyes before trying to remove the things we see in others. If we love them, we will change how we treat them, talk to them, and approach them. In this, we need to learn patience on every level—patience to put them and their hearts before our own; patience while waiting for them to change how they treat us; patience for a more fulfilling life in Christ as we wait for the miracles His love brings.

In communication, be a patient listener. Wait for your turn to speak, then after having full knowledge of their heart, communicate yours. Remember that it's written,

> "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath." (James 1:19)

Those that are slow to speak give more thought to their words. By thinking before they speak, they add wisdom to the conversation. Those that are slow to wrath are patient while trying to express their viewpoint. They show patience with others while they wait for the other person to change.

Rather than expecting them to change, let go of expectations and seek to please God for yourself. A person ought to take their own relationship seriously without worrying about what the next person is doing. A patient person would wait to see the fruit they desire and use words of kindness to

please God while they wait.

The wrath of words is most commonly found during arguments. A wise man is known by his patience, and a fool is known for his wrath. Let others know you for your patience. Even though it can be difficult to have a patient disagreement, it is possible. But if we are quick to wrath, remember that we reap what we sow. If we sow anger in the other person, it is likely that they will repay us with the same.

We don't feel wrong for the words we're using at the time, and because they revile us, it adds fuel to the fire in our hearts. In a way, we're creating our own fights. It takes two to fight but one to end a fight. Remember that, and be the one who tones it down rather than adding aggression.

Now, aggression isn't only in forceful actions but in our words. If you can see someone isn't responding well to what you're saying, don't keep pressing your point. Just because you say it nicely doesn't make you right. If your words are aggravating the other person, try using a different approach. Some people say, "If at first you don't succeed try and try again." But this isn't a universal truth. This doesn't work for how we communicate our hearts. Remember instead that, "If at first you don't succeed, try a new approach." Rephrase your words, and try communicating in a way that calms the other person down rather than heating them up. Try using loving words that heal and not contentious ones that tear apart.

Sometimes when we argue, we feel as if we're the better person because we don't get heated while the other person always seems angry. But from God's perspective, He sees that the words we choose are causing the arguments and aggravating that person. He would call us to change the way we approach these people. Remember the scripture that says,

> "Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand." (Rom. 14:1–4)

And again,

> “So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way. I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.” (Rom. 14:12–14)

And also,

> “Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine *nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak*. Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.” (Rom. 14:19–22)

And this leads to consider another scripture, which says,

> “We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.’ For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” (Rom. 15:1–4)

And finally, as Paul said of himself, so we should maintain in our own hearts,

> “And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” (1 Cor. 8:11–13)

If you feel as if communicating differently would be like eating

vegetables, then eat those vegetables out of love for the other person. This is showing the perfect love of Christ as we are commanded to do. Meet the other person half way as God does for you. He doesn't expect you to know everything and do everything immediately. Rather, He cherishes you where you're at while you take the time to grow and do better things.

Likewise, don't expect others to accomplish all you want them to do, but be faithful to accomplish all the Lord wants you to. Let go of your expectations for others. Expectations can lead to dissatisfaction on your part when they don't meet those expectations. And others can sense that you have those expectations. As a result, they'll be constantly seeking to please you and getting burned out when they can't.

This is where the worst issue begins. These people are learning to satisfy your desires rather than God's. They can't try to live up to your expectations for them and God's expectations at the same time. Either they live for you or for God. So let go of your expectations and let them live for the Lord.

Expectations are rooted in desire. How we respond to desire determines whether our actions will be sin or not. If we communicate our desires to others and they don't fulfill them, we'll be dissatisfied. But if they fulfill them, we won't be happy either if we expected them to do it. Rather, we will be content that they measured up to our standards.

You'll feel more blessed if you don't expect to receive anything from someone else. Then if they give you what you ask for, it will be more like receiving a present than a duty. Everyone enjoys a present, and everyone expects a duty to be fulfilled.

Expectations can lead to apathy and broken relationships. Well communicated desires can lead to blessings and a greater joy in the process. When they fulfill what we didn't expect, it will be a joy to us and increase the general happiness of our own lives.

Ultimately, the things you expect of others and how you communicate your heart can make the difference between a broken life or a joyous one. Remember that they respond to the treatment we give them. Through the course of much time, the seeds of poor treatment turn into bad fruit.

Like a flower, any relationship needs to be treated right. If you treat it right, it will blossom and become beautiful. But if you don't treat it right, it

will wilt. What happens to a flower that wilts? You don't desire to keep it on display in your vase but would rather throw it out and get a new flower.

This is how some act in their relationships, especially friendships and marriage. It's like replacing a lamp to them. "Hey, if it breaks, I'll get a new one. They're cheap at Walmart anyway."

Some treat their relationships with little value. But a relationship is like a collector's item. If it's worth much to you, you'll pay much for it. If you want better relationships, then let them have a greater value to you.

Your relationships are only as valuable as you make them. If you put much time into them, they will blossom and flourish. But if they're dispensable, you won't treat them for what their worth, and they will likely break.

When a relationship isn't worth much to a person, they will be prone to bad relationships. They treat them as if they're dispensable when a person hasn't satisfied them. Consider marriages today. If a person's spouse has been a burden to them, the common trend even among Christians is to divorce and find someone else that will satisfy their desires.

How selfish! Where is the patient love of God in that? How are we working out love by expecting our desires to be met rather than meeting God's desires in the marriage? Acting this way isn't Christian, and this isn't loving at all! So don't let it even be a word in your vocabulary. I'd exhort you to have a "marriage dictionary." This isn't a literal book but some agreed words you can and cannot use in your relationship. Let divorce be one of those that never makes it to the dictionary.

But some don't take it to heart that God hates divorce. This is what happens when self-love enters the marriage. But when Christ's selfless love is the center of the marriage, it blossoms and is beautiful. Then the closer to Christ each of you become, the closer to each other you'll be.

Work out love, and treat each other with the same love Christ calls us to have. Make your spouse an indispensable partner. Let them know through the works of your love that if you lost them, it would be like losing a limb.

Remember that we gave them our hand in marriage. If a law were made that if a person divorced they had to cut their hand off and give it to their spouse, no one would divorce today. "You gave them your hand in marriage, so if you want to part ways, your hand is still theirs."

If a person wouldn’t want to lose their hand to divorce but would do it under any other condition, then it’s obvious that some Christians today aren’t loving their neighbors as themselves. And these are their spouses! If such a person wouldn’t treat their own spouse with value, then how can they expect any of their other relationships to be any better? The marriage holds precedence over friendships. A person is with their spouse daily. If they can’t love the one they see every day, how can they love the one they only see on occasion?

Examine your own heart, and be careful not to expect your desires to be met. Nothing could be more selfish or unloving.

Consider other relationships as well, such as in the workplace. If you don’t measure up to the standards of the boss, they’ll fire you. Don’t treat those around you the same. Your friendships and family should be indispensable.

Be this way even in the workplace. If you have authority, then remember that your employees have families and mouths to feed. They did this back in the 1940s by treating each employee like family. They sought to take care of one another and bring the best out of someone rather than firing them. Being a Christian, you ought to do the same.

Rather than treating your employees as if they’re dispensable, try to bring the best out of them. Always try to bring the best out of any person, whether your employee, spouse, friend, or child, and don’t merely criticize them for the worst you see in them. Augment a person; don’t criticize them.

Look at your life and consider if there’s anyone you’ve been laying expectations on. Are you calling anyone to measure up to your standards? How can you improve this situation so that it brings glory to the Lord? Consider these things, and fix the way you’re communicating your desires. Stop expecting others to fill them, and be blessed when they do.

Likewise, let these people communicate their heart to you without interruption. Don’t cut them off, but let them share their hearts. Let them speak first, then speak afterward. Show love through being more ears than mouth.

But if we only talk, then they won’t want to listen to us, because we never listen to them. First we should hear a person out to understand where they’re coming from. Then we can get down to their level to communicate

more effectively with them. By beginning with what they understand and adding onto it, we can lead them to understand our viewpoint with greater clarity.

Communication is key in every relationship. When love is shared with greater clarity, each heart becomes more receptive to the other, thus creating a greater bond and stronger friendship. In every relationship, communication is the mortar. Our hearts and Christ are the foundation and the bricks we build with, but how we communicate with each other determines how good or bad our relationships will be.

If we communicate Christ's love badly, then the mortar will be weak and the whole structure in danger of ruin. But how can we communicate God's love badly? By not letting God work through us. If we operate in our flesh by trying to fix our relationships ourselves, they'll end up more broken in the end. You can't merely read your Bible and try to apply what you read on your own.

You need to submit to God, listen intently for His voice and conviction, and then obey it. Pray before doing anything (see Philippians 4:6). Prayer should be fluid and constant, like a continual overflow of the heart. Let God hear your heart, and you also listen to His. Be faithful to obey the Spirit. We make Jesus the center by listening to and obeying Him. So listen to God better and listen to others better.

Being a better listener gives a person wiser responses. When we listen more intently, we can communicate our hearts more effectively. By being quiet, listening more, and talking less, we will be viewed as receptive people. Everyone wants to be close to those that lovingly receive their hearts.

Fools are known by their many words (see Ecclesiastes 5:3). But those that listen convey their words with the greatest wisdom. In the book of Job, only one friend of Job's was considered wise. God didn't rebuke him but added onto his words when the Lord decided to talk to Job.

This man was Elihu. He was the youngest in the whole group but was considered wisest because he listened carefully and then left a thoughtful and wise reply. As it is written,

> "Now because they were years older than he, Elihu had waited to speak to Job." (Job 32:4)

> “So Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, answered and said: ‘I am young in years, and you are very old; Therefore I was afraid, And dared not declare my opinion to you. I said, “Age should speak, And multitude of years should teach wisdom.” But there is a spirit in man, And the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding. Great men are not always wise, Nor do the aged always understand justice.’” (Job 32:6–9)

His first article of wisdom is that he waited to speak. His second article was that after he had full knowledge of the argument, he spoke with words of understanding. Elihu declared that no matter the age of a man, anyone who has the Spirit of God (breath of God) is given a greater wisdom by God.

Job’s three other friends didn’t speak with understanding in that they assumed Job did wrong and refused to hear him out. They didn’t know what that wrong was, but the one who listened did. Job didn’t do anything wrong to deserve his circumstances, but he had the wrong heart about his circumstances.

The wrong Job did is that he didn’t justify God in all his heartache. He justified only himself and declared himself as righteous when God ought to declare that for us. He also made God out to be his enemy when Satan ruined his life, not God. Hence the Lord later rebuked Job as God’s word opens up saying,

> “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: ‘Who is this who darkens counsel By words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me.’” (Job 38:1–3)

Due to his sin, Job repented and hence replied to God as thus,

> “Then Job answered the Lord and said: ‘I know that You can do everything, And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. *You asked, ‘Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.* Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, ‘I will question you, and you shall answer Me.’ I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now

> my eye sees You. *Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes*." (Job 42:1–6)

Although Job didn't do anything to deserve his circumstances, he didn't justify God. In that, he sinned but only after he was grieved so heavily. He received his afflictions first, having not sinned, then stumbled in all his heartache.

Now consider Job's situation. Do you see how his friends refused to hear him out? What did he call them in the end? "A bunch of miserable comforters you are!"

Those who listen carefully make better comforters. Remember that the Holy Spirit is a comforter. If you are operating in the Spirit, you will speak comfort to the suffering children of God. The Lord rebuked the three men who tormented Job, but He didn't speak a word against Elihu, who listened. As it is written,

> "And so it was, after the Lord had spoken these words to Job, that the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has.'" Job 42:7

Elihu was the fourth among the three friends of Job. Hence the Scriptures go on to say,

> "So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did as the Lord commanded them; for the Lord had accepted Job." (Job 42:9)

As we can well see, Elihu was not among the three whom God rebuked. So be like Elihu and listen better to have a better answer.

Make it your aim to listen well always. If you want to communicate your heart more effectively, then work on being a better listener first. By merely listening to a broken heart, you can be more of a comfort. Sometimes people just want a shoulder to cry on.

For some people, there are no words that can comfort their situation. But two arms to hold them and two ears to hear them out is all they need to know they're loved and be comforted. Consider this, and be willing to give it to others. Then by being an avid listener, we will be more likely to speak something substantial and meaningful to that person.

This should be how we treat all people, hearing first then speaking last. As we read in James 1:19, “be swift to hear and slow to speak…” In every relationship and at every moment, there is little else more meaningful to add to a conversation than two listening ears.

Through time and much practice of using a loving ear and thoughtful words, you’ll see how people will go from disrespecting you to honoring and admiring you. After much time, those who have unrightfully viewed you as a fool will consider you to be a teacher of wisdom.

By changing the way you approach others, it will change how they treat you. Our lives are made better when others cherish us more. When you add meaning to their lives through the way you listen to them and communicate your heart, it will cause them to view you as precious. First count them as precious, and they’ll repay you with the same. You’ll add value to them, and everyone cherishes what they treasure. Even so, they cherish you if you become their treasure.

Habit Six

Tasteful Tongue

THE TONGUE CAN be a great source of comfort or an unruly evil. As it is written,

> "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh." (James 3:5–12)

There are times that our words can be poison. Knowing this, we ought to take to heart the words we choose to use. Our words must be life, truth, and spoken in love.

If we are to emulate Christ in our speech, we ought to choose words that heal. But there are times that the things we say break down, tear apart, or

don’t edify. Yet if we speak through love, our words will be seasoned with salt.

We know that the salt is Christ. Therefore, when we use salty words, we point others back to Christ. Before speaking, ask yourself, “Am I turning this person back to Christ with what I’m about to say?” and “Am I speaking with love?”

Sometimes our words can be harsh. If we don’t think before we speak, we can destroy an already broken heart. But by choosing words that heal, we can lift up, build up, strengthen, and edify.

But this can be difficult, especially during tense moments. In the expressions of anger, we tend to say things we don’t mean. But lost friendships and broken hearts aren’t worth the few costly words we use.

When we speak in anger, we epitomize the “hell fire” tongue. We speak condemning words of doom, brokenness, and disaster on another. Yet we know that we will be judged according to our judgment. If we speak in love and build others up in kindness, how might the Lord judge us?

Ultimately, when we choose wrongful words, we’re acting in the flesh. By establishing the difference between the flesh and the Spirit, we can understand how to have wholesome words.

Our words reflect our hearts. If we’re accustomed to sitting idly in the flesh, we will most likely speak through the flesh. The flesh prefers idle things and everything contrary to the Lord. But if we meditate on the Spirit, we will desire and speak of those things that glorify God through the Spirit.

Seeing that the mouth is the centerpiece of all human communication, it is necessary to have a tasteful tongue. We must learn to use tasteful words established in the love of God. We must grow in building up, edifying, and strengthening one another with love.

We can’t always tell when someone else’s heart is weary. We don’t always know what they’re thinking or what’s going on in the secret place of their heart. But if we season our mouths with love, we will always speak tastefully.

It’s a true statement that we should think before we speak. We must all learn to be more effective communicators of the heart of God. It is not merely that we should express our own hearts but that we should express the heart of Christ. Our hearts must conform to His, and seeing that this is the case, we

should be expressing His heart and not our own.

When we only express our own hearts, we express the flesh. We are called to submit to His heart. If we seek His heart and act in it, then we will act in Christ. But if we seek our own heart while ignoring His, we will express our words through the flesh.

Ultimately, we are called to speak and work through the Spirit, not the heart of the flesh. If we speak through the flesh, we will guide others to idleness and sin with unedifying speech. But if we speak through the Spirit, being sober in the Spirit, we will lead one another to the light of life.

As we know, the works of the flesh are sin, and the works of the Spirit are light and life. If we conduct ourselves through the Spirit, then we will seek the things of the Spirit. If we seek the things of the Spirit, we will speak the things of the Spirit.

Remember also that the first fruit of the Spirit is love. By restraining our hearts and listening carefully for the Lord, we will more effectively communicate His heart to those we love. If we love one another, we will show it through the sincerity of the Spirit.

Knowing this, we must pay attention to our own hearts. We need to ask ourselves, “How am I being loving with what I’m saying?” or “How is this leading them to Christ?” as we mentioned before.

If we aren’t careful to guard our hearts, our words will tear down an already broken person. But love is a healer. If we love with our words, we will choose words that heal.

Knowing this, we should be circumspect and look for the hurting. Open your eyes to the needs of others around you. Is anyone suffering? Is anyone discouraged or weary? Show them the love they deserve.

If you don’t guard your mouth, you could say something that will further hurt or discourage them. But if you love them, then speak words of comfort through the Holy Spirit. Let love guide your mouth and build up their hearts.

Don’t pass up anyone with a downcast spirit. Don’t let a single person slip through your fingers. If anyone is hurting, show them the love of Christ. Encourage them, edify them, build them up, and comfort them.

Make their situation as if it were your own. How would you want to be comforted? How would you want someone to help you? What do you wish

someone would say to you if you were in their circumstance?

Speak these things to them and so fulfill the love of Christ. Comfort the fainthearted, satisfy the weary, and uphold the weak. Be diligent to present Christ to all men, seasoning your words with salt.

Salty words are more than words spoken in kindness. Salty words are also the words of the Spirit. Let the Spirit speak through you by being an avid listener of the Holy Spirit. This is why we put “avid listener” before this one as a habit.

Listen carefully to the voice of God that you may convey the messages of God. Listen for His beating heart that you may share His heart. Listen to the sound of His love, be motivated by it, and share it with others.

Also, be careful to turn from idle speech. If there is anything that does not edify, if there is anything that does not glorify the Lord, or if there’s anything that isn’t pertaining to Christ, then it is idle. Steer your conversations back to holiness. Do not be caught up in a drawn out, idle conversation.

Don’t try to bring God into the conversation. Rather, make Him the centerpiece. Too many Christians have a habit of bringing God into their lives versus making Him the entire point of life. Some Christians choose to be idle and think they can honor the Lord by randomly bringing Him into the picture.

But God needs to be the source and center of who we are. If He is, then it will be reflected in our words. But among some Christians, the idle topic, idle activity, or idle situation is the centerpiece, and Christ is the removable object. If He can be brought into the conversation or activity, then He can be removed from it just as easily.

If anyone loves their spouse, they will speak well of them every time they mention them. Anyone who is madly in love can’t stop talking about the person they love. We likewise should continually have the Lord on our mouths. Words are the overflow of the heart. So if we love the Lord, then many edifying and encouraging conversations will spring forth every day.

How are we turning others to Christ if we’re not sharing Christ? We are saved by faith, and faith comes by hearing. How are the unbelievers receiving Jesus if we aren’t sharing Him with them in our conversations?

Some have a habit of avoiding God altogether and merely showing acts

of kindness. While kindness is necessary for conviction, if we do not establish convicting words, there will be no repentance. Beloved, speak well of your Heavenly Spouse, and turn your conversations back to the Lord.

As it is also written,

> "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!'" (Rom. 10:14–15)

The unbeliever will not believe if you don't share the goodness of the Lord with them. You *must* preach Christ to the unsaved. Don't let them slip between your fingers like a gardener does the dirt. Be kind in your conduct, but share truth in your words. No one gets saved by kindness alone. You have to talk about the Lord with them. If they revile you for it, then love on them.

Don't press someone incessantly who doesn't want to hear it. Share what they need to hear, but show them what they need to see. Show them Christ through kindness. Those that don't want to hear about Christ have already heard the Gospel and rejected it. There is no one that can be offended at the Gospel without having heard it. How can anyone be offended by something they've never heard of? But all find offense through the things they see and hear.

Indeed, speak truth to those that are offended, for without it, they can't believe. But with these be diligent to love them though they hate you. Be kind to them, and cherish their needs. In this, they will be greatly convicted because having hated you, you've loved them.

Before we received Christ, our conduct was hateful toward Him. Even if we didn't intend it to be, when we didn't love Him, we worked out hatred against Him. Yet He, having experienced hatred from us, was diligent to repay us with love—a love that cost Him His life. Then we, having experienced love though we hated Him, were broken. Thus in our brokenness, we repented and found Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. So it was the loving kindness of the Lord that led us to repentance, and if we give others the same through our words and conduct, they may likely repent as

well.

Beloved, emulate the heart of Christ in this. Be Jesus to all men. You are an ambassador of Christ; therefore do what Jesus would do. And what would He do to His enemy?

He would pray for those that spitefully use Him. He would cherish the needs of those that accuse Him. He would be willing to forgive those that seek His destruction. He would care for them when they're sick, deliver them from catastrophe, and comfort their hearts with kindness.

Any man that rejects the Lord is condemned. If you love these people, you'll be compelled to express your love to them. The Lord doesn't desire their condemnation but feeds them daily. He causes the rain to fall, the seed to grow, and the food to be found on their tables. He provides for the needs of evil men. Therefore let us be found doing the same.

Let the evil see your good works and be convicted by the loving kindness you show them. Take care of them and relieve them from suffering. Feed their needs and cherish them. If God tells you to leave them alone and do nothing, then obey. Otherwise seek good for those who hate you, as Jesus did for us when we hated Him.

If they reject the Lord, know that they will reject you. If they hate Jesus, know that they'll hate you as well. If they despise the words of Christ, they'll count you as an abomination.

They will persecute you, hurt you, laugh at your calamity, and seek your destruction. They will be kind to your face but stab you behind your back. Repay their evil with good, and be the image of Christ in all your conduct. Though they think their works are hidden and count you as a fool for your kindness, God sees everything and will repay them. If you will be judged according to your works, what will be the end of those who persecuted you for your kindness?

Know that Jesus doesn't deal with unrepentant sinners forever. Neither should you. There is a time and a place for every activity under the sun. There is a time to share love and to push through persecution. But there is also a time to flee from persecution. As it is written,

> "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another…" (Matt. 10:23)

And also,

> “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.’ Therefore ‘Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.’
>
> ‘I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the Lord Almighty.’ Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1)

By communing with the world, you are fellowshipping with the world. You serve God, but they serve Satan through their wicked conduct and unrepentance. What does God have to do with Satan? Should the devil sit at the same table as God? If he does, there will be conflict.

But for anyone who calls themselves a Christian, if they never seem to conflict with the world around them to some degree, it may be because they are becoming men pleasers rather than God pleasers. Not that we should look for conflict but that it comes naturally by seeking to be godly in an evil world.

As it is written,

> “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Tim. 3:12)

Yet those that man-please suffer little because they hide their good works and commune with evil out of fear for persecution.

But what is written about pleasing men?

> “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.”

(Gal. 1:10)

Again, we are not saying to look for conflict but rather that the world naturally conflicts with the children of God. As we read,

> "Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." (Gal. 4:28–30)

If you seek to be godly, you will be persecuted. If you walk in love, you'll be despised. But some will be convicted and repent. Yet if you man please, then you're no longer serving Christ. In this, it's always good to test yourself and determine whether you're fearing man or pleasing God.

Ask yourself, "In what ways do I please men rather than God?" If there is any way that you have been, repent and honor the Lord. Do what is right in God's eyes, not man's.

Look for ways you haven't "cast out the bondwoman" from your life, and separate yourself to the Lord. Be sanctified to Him and set apart for His purpose. God has a plan for you. Therefore surrender to it and follow Him in it. This will require you to leave the world behind. Nevertheless, do not fear, for it is in God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. As we read,

> "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:32–34)

Do not live for this world, but live for Christ. Perfect yourself in holiness, and do not be influenced by the world. Act and speak in love, as Christ would do, and be set apart for God's use. Sanctified literally means to be set apart for the purpose of God. Be sanctified in Christ Jesus, and come out from the world around you. Yes, we are called to be in the world but not

of the world.

We are called to come out from among them. We are called to stop dealing with them lest we be influenced by them to become like them. And if you do not come out from among them, you *WILL* be influenced by them. Though it may not be your heart, in due time you'll become like them. Their fleshly words will become your fleshly words; their sinful conduct will become your sinful conduct.

Therefore, Beloved, do not become like the world to let the world in. But be like Christ that they may find Christ. If they despise Christ and don't want Him in their lives, then remove yourself from their life. You'll be doing yourself a favor.

Besides all this, why should you spend all your energies on someone who doesn't want God when there are so many people who do? Should 10 men who would receive Christ be forsaken because you've spent all your energy on one man who hates God? This is why Jesus tells you to flee to the next city when you're persecuted. Flee the situation of persecution when necessary, and pursue those who will listen to God.

If anyone doesn't listen, we read that they are not of God. We also read that those who hear the Father's words will be saved. But if anyone does not hear, then it is either not their time or they have rejected God altogether and will die as an unbeliever.

Don't waste your energy on those who won't love the Lord. Pursue those who will, and evangelize accordingly. But this doesn't mean that you should forsake those who hate you. Yes, you should love them, for who knows whether they will receive Christ or not? And some having been convicted by kindness may repent. But if through the process of a long time they don't receive the Lord, pray about what you should do. Be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. If God is telling you to move on, then move on.

Some people have an issue with this, especially when it comes to unsaved family. They prefer to cling to the bonds of the flesh while ignoring the Spirit, who says, "Move on."

Some would argue, "God is a God of family!" Why then does Jesus say,

> "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his

> father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." (Matt. 10:34–39)

If then God was a God of family, why does he bring division to it? What kind of division do we find? A division between flesh and spirit. There is family of flesh, and there is family of Spirit. God is a God of spiritual family. He is the God of the living, not the dead. Your family, who rejects God, are spiritually dead, and He is not their God nor the God of their family. Therefore do not partake with them if God has told you to leave. There is a time and a place for everything. If He tells you to stay and witness, then do it. But do not let them influence you to sin.

When they die, where will they be? If you will be with the Lord and they will be dead in hell, how are they your family at all? In the eternal eye, they aren't your family. Therefore be diligent to lead them to Christ with your words if you truly love them.

Those that have not received the Lord and are of the flesh will persecute the children of God. Even so your own family will persecute you because you love God. They will put out your light, and some will secretly conspire against you. They'll be kind to your face, but behind your back, they'll be trying to figure out how to turn you away from God. They will devise plans, use manipulative words, and take advantage of situations.

They will do whatever they can do to turn you away because they don't want God in their life and you're bringing Him in. In their heart, they declare that your dedication to the Lord "is merely a phase." As if it's something you could get over? As if it's something you would no longer do? But nothing is more life changing than a relationship with Jesus Christ. Knowing this, change your life by avoiding those who seek to separate you from God.

If we do not love the Lord more than our own family, even Jesus said that we are not worthy of Him. Yet some Christians keep making excuses to continue with the family they love—their family who rejects Christ, who wants to turn them from the Lord, and who rejects their words; their family

who will never receive Jesus in them nor receive them as servants of God; those who call God's children hypocrites and persecute those who walk righteously before the Lord. Such Christians are loving their family more than God and need to examine their hearts and repent.

For even Jesus said,

> "…Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead." (Matt. 8:22)

What He means to say is separate yourself from the spiritually dead. Those that will not receive the Lord are spiritually dead. Separate yourself from them. The Old Testament at times uses leprosy to describe sin. How does one contract leprosy? By either touching someone who has leprosy or by continuously handling the dead.

Similarly, if you continuously handle the spiritually dead, you will contract a "spiritual leprosy." Or that is to say that you will sin like those who you surround yourself with. You will become like them, act like them, talk like them, and do as they do. Remember that the Lord forbade Israel to commune with the nations around them. Why? "Lest you should be ensnared by their idols…"

The nations around them did not have God but formed their own gods. In today's day and age, these gods may not be literal graven images. These gods would have the appearance of wealth, vanity, working hard to sustain oneself rather than living a faith filled life, credit, TV, video games, movies, family, friends, gossip, workplaces (for those workaholics), among many other things. Rather than being wrapped up in the cares of this life, we should be zealous for Jesus Christ.

Even as it is written,

> "Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity." (Luke 8:14)

Jesus tells us to come out from among them lest we be ensnared by the cares of this life and bear no fruit to maturity. And what does the Lord say about those who bear no fruit?

> "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown

into the fire.” (Matt. 7:19)

And also,

> “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” (John 15:5–6)

And He also mentions that even teachers can be caught up in the cares of this life:

> “Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.” (Luke 12:44–46)

Don’t be choked by the cares of this life, but establish your heart in the love of Christ. If you surround yourself with unbelievers, you will act like an unbeliever. If you are ensnared by the world and act like an unbeliever, you’ll receive a portion of an unbeliever in judgment. And what portion do they receive?

Consider this in your heart, be zealous for Christ, and walk in love toward God. Though we’re called to love our families—and all men—remember that we are to love the Lord our God more than all men. How can our words be filled with the love of Christ unless we fill our hearts with Christ? But if we fill ourselves with these idols, then it is more than obvious that our words will be sin.

Love God the most, and love all men with the love of Christ. Yet pursue those who will receive the Lord, and do not waste your entire life on those who won’t. A person who clings to those who hate God is really clinging to this life. Yet if anyone receives us, they will receive Christ. And those who receive Christ will by no means lose their reward. As it is written,

> “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.” (Matt. 10:40–42)

Pursue those who will receive the gospel. Those who hate you may be convicted by God’s love at work in you and receive it. Don’t waste your energies on those who will not be saved, but make disciples of those who will desire the Lord.

But how can you tell if one will receive Him through your testimony? By listening to the Spirit. For a period of time He’ll tell you to witness. Then after a long time He may tell you to leave them behind and move on. If you don’t listen, then you’ll sin. To not obey the Spirit is to sin.

Be diligent to share Christ with all men, and don’t be given over to idle conversations. Don’t talk idly and merely bring God into the conversation to justify it. Try to bring everything back to the center of Christ. Lead all people to Christ, and so fulfill the commission to make disciples.

Be especially diligent to lead your children to Christ, even as you’re commanded to. For it is written,

> “Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.” (Deut. 11:18–19)

Remember that love fulfills the commandments. If you love God, you’ll make Him the centerpiece of your conversations. One who is madly in love cannot stop talking about the one they love. Therefore be madly in love with Christ, and don’t stop talking about Him. Edify yourself by the things that overflow from your heart. Let His Spirit speak through you as you listen to His words. Listen carefully to the Holy Spirit, and surrender your tongue to

Him. By this, your tongue will be seasoned with salt, and you will love according to the love of God.

Keep yourself from idle babblings, remembering that if it's not Jesus, then it's rubbish. Keep the rubbish of this world from your mouth. Is rubbish tasteful? If indeed you want a tasteful tongue, let the sweet honey of the Holy Spirit be upon it. But shun idleness lest you increase in ungodliness. For it is written,

> "But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness." (2 Tim. 2:16)

Beloved, if you lead others to godliness, you will receive a sure reward. As it is also written,

> "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, And those who turn many to righteousness Like the stars forever and ever." (Dan. 12:2–3)

Always share the Lord with your children. Don't let their teachings be centered on Sunday school. God gave you them and commands you to lead them in the things of Christ always. Obey the Spirit at all times, and He will lead your child to salvation.

Our mouths only speak the things our hearts overflow with. So let your heart be full of the love of Christ, and you'll communicate His love. Change how you communicate your heart, and it will change how others respond to you.

By changing yourself and how you conduct yourself, it will change how others perceive you. In this, you are more likely to make friends and bring others to Christ than if you combined with the world. If you try to forcibly change your life around you through changing other people to suit yourself, you'll end up making enemies in the end.

Sometimes the greatest causes of stress come from how others treat us. People treat us the way they do because of how they perceive us. If they perceive us as a threat, they'll act harshly. But if we change how we act, then they will see the love of God at work in us.

If you walk in love, you're more likely to receive a kind response. Remember that you reap what you sow. Sow love in others, and you'll reap kindness from them in due time. Now remember that a harvest takes much time to realize. Today's culture is an instant results culture. If we don't see results immediately, we become discouraged, depressed, or angered. But we know that patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and good things take time to grow. Likewise, don't expect an instant harvest from anyone just because you were nice for a few months.

If you show your enemy kindness, they won't be so quick to return the favor. In the end, they'll think you're being a hypocrite and repay your kindness with evil just to get a reaction out of you. But if you maintain a meek heart like Christ, through much time, they will realize their sin and may repent.

By practicing a tasteful tongue with others, it will change how others perceive us. Either they will perceive us as sound in wisdom and love or fleshly. Therefore guard the words of your heart, sharing them wisely in love. If they perceive you as loving, they will respect you. Your life will be changed if you change how you express your heart to others to share the love of Christ.

Habit Seven

Committed to a Life of Good

EVERYONE WANTS TO do good, and nearly everyone believes that they do. Yet God judges our actions and weighs them in the balance. Knowing this, we must be fervent to do what is right in God's eyes and not our own.

If we think we're doing the right thing without examining ourselves and comparing ourselves to the Scriptures, we fool ourselves. As it is written,

> "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." (Proverbs 16:25)

And also,

> "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirits." (Proverbs 16:2)

Our works are always being weighed in the balance. Therefore it is good to continue in repentance, seeking the works that glorify the Lord. For it is written,

> "The highway of the upright is to depart from evil; He who keeps his way preserves his soul." (Proverbs 16:17)

But what exactly is evil, and how do we preserve our soul? Isn't our soul preserved by Christ? How then does He preserve it, and what does He call us to do?

As we know, evil is found in every sin we commit. The root of sin is our desire. Satan entices the desires of our hearts, which causes us to stumble. As we read,

> “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.” (James 1:14–15)

Our desire is the source, and Satan is the tempter. Knowing this, not everything we think is right truly is right. We need constant redirecting by the Holy Spirit because our hearts go astray continually (especially in the little things). Therefore we must remain continually sensitive to His voice, being led by Him always in everything we do and in every step we take in life. As we read,

> “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” (Rom. 8:14)

This leading takes place when we hear God’s voice and obey it. By obeying God, we find good. By obeying our own hearts, we find evil. Thus we have both good and evil within us. Our evil is our flesh and the works of it, and the good is the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. As it is also written,

> “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.
>
> I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me

> from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!
>
> So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin." (Rom. 7:15–25)

In other words, Paul is saying that nothing good dwells in our flesh. How to perform what is good isn't found in it either. As he said, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find."

It isn't that he doesn't know how to do good but that his flesh can't perform what is good, and neither can ours. In other scriptures, Paul informs us that we do good works when we operate in the Spirit.

If we try to operate in and of ourselves, then there is nothing good in what we do. Many people know this already, but some forget to apply it to their walks, or they may not know how to operate in the Spirit. So instead, they read the Bible then try to apply it in the manner they see best. This is how the Jews viewed the law of God and couldn't perform it. Likewise, we cannot perform the things Jesus calls us to without the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Now be sincere with yourself, and ask yourself with an honest heart if you know *exactly* what it means to be led by the Spirit. If so, then continue in what is good, but if you don't completely understand it, then seek to grow in it. Be passionate about growing and about experiencing the depths of a relationship with the Lord.

We are led by the Spirit when we hear and obey His voice. The more sensitive we are to His voice and the more fervent we are to obey Him, the more we walk in the Spirit.

The Scriptures tell us that the works of the flesh are always sin. We are led into sin by our flesh through our own desires. As we grow in the Lord and become more sensitive to the Holy Spirit's voice, our desires begin to conform to His. We are called to obey God always and to be fervent for His word. Yet this is not a call to legalism but rather a call to lovingly obey the voice of the Holy Spirit as He leads us.

As we mentioned before,

> "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the

Spirit in sincere love of the brethren…" (1 Pet. 1:22)

We purify our souls through obeying the Holy Spirit and the truth of God found in His word. Remember that God cannot lie, therefore the Holy Spirit will always lead you to what is right and what is truth in everything He says.

Also, every work must be founded in the will of God, as we read,

> "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." (Col. 1:9–10)

We walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him when we know His will and apply it. By this we are fruitful in every good work. Now how can we know His will unless we hear it from His Holy Spirit? The Spirit teaches the will of the Father, and thus we must make ourselves sensitive to His voice that we may live by His leading.

Remember that the Spirit comes as a still small voice. In order to hear a quiet voice, we need to sit forward and pay attention to it. In order to hear a whisper, we need to press our ear up against the whisperer's mouth. Likewise, we need to pay attention to God's voice and apply it daily. Because it comes as a whisper, it can be hard to hear, especially with a storm of life raging around you. If you feel pushed to do anything during a storm of life, so pushed that you don't have time to hear from God, then know that it's probably not God speaking to you. Satan is pushing you so that you act without God.

If you do something without God, it will fail. Whenever we do anything without Him, we sin, and when we sin, we've failed already. We know that those that practice sin are not saved.

These sins are the works of the flesh. No person is justified by their flesh but by Jesus Christ. Therefore we must make every effort to continue in the Spirit, following His voice and conviction. By so doing, we will walk in love toward the Lord. For Jesus said,

> "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." (John

15:14)

The things Jesus commands us on a daily basis are conveyed to us through the Holy Spirit. Therefore if we love the Lord, we will obey His Spirit at all times. God's love is the only pathway to perfect success, and unless we walk by it, we will never know the depths of a truly meaningful life.

Through this we know that we must be led by Him in all things. We must be led by His Spirit in the way we conduct ourselves and act. If we are not led by the Holy Spirit's conviction, then what are we led by? Obviously either our own hearts or Satan. We know that Satan entices us by the desires of our hearts. Therefore a person led by their heart is led in the will of both the flesh and Satan. Thus we find no grey area in Christ. As He said,

> "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad." (Matt. 12:30)

Either your actions are for Jesus or against Him. Either you are building up the kingdom or tearing it down. One may proclaim that idle hands do nothing. Yet remember the true saying that says, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." Indeed, there is no grey area! If we do nothing, our idle hands are working through Satan, but if we practice God's works of love, we will surely please Him.

The works of the flesh are evident by self-love. Yet the works of the Spirit will always be in God's wisdom. They are established in His word and portrayed with selfless love. By these works we are justified and can have peace before the Lord.

Now one may ask, "What is the difference between the works of the flesh and of the Spirit?" We know that the works of the flesh are sin, but where do they come from? The desires of our own heart. Rather than being driven by our hearts, we must be driven to obey God's word. Sometimes our desires may even have the appearance of godliness as they can come in the form of self-imposed religion.

Self-imposed religion can take many forms in a believer's life without them even being aware of it. One example would be when a person would rather go to a Bible study than help a friend in need. Or deciding to go to

Bible college without laying it at God's feet that He can determine how you will grow in your walk. Remember that we are all taught by God, so let Him choose the curriculum and the tools He wants for you to learn by. Too many people try to grow themselves and forget the scriptures, which say,

> "So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase." (1 Cor. 3:7)

Therefore let Him determine what church you will be planted in and who will water you that He may determine what your increase will look like. Before having Christ, we were taught by the world that if we want to better ourselves, then we should go seek the tools and education necessary to grow. So as Christians, if we want to grow in our walks, we buy books and tools for growing, and we go to conferences, seminars, and Bible College without even asking God if we should do these things. But the sons of God are led by His Spirit. As we have mentioned before,

> "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." (Rom. 8:14)

How are we being led if we aren't laying our wants and desires before God? But even as it is written,

> "Commit your works to the LORD, And your thoughts will be established." (Prov. 16:3)

And that we should seek the Lord before doing anything is evident. For we also read,

> "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6–7)

Unless God has already made clear the path you should take in life, then pray first for clarity and understanding. Obviously, if you know what God wants of you, then just do it, but if there is an ounce of uncertainty, then don't brush it off.

Seek God's council to live by it. That way you may live according to His will. For as we just read, those that seek God's council and live according to it have perfect peace. If you want perfect peace in your life, learn to be led by the Holy Spirit in everything you do, take it seriously, and be faithful. Learn to discern between your heart and God's, then deny yourself, carry your cross, and live for God's will.

Now, some ask, "Why wouldn't God want Bible college or this or that conference or seminar?" But this they ask without actually seeking an answer to their question. They aren't asking to know why God wouldn't want it. Rather, they "ask" in an attempt to justify themselves and assume an answer of "if it's a good thing, God wants you to do it."

When you speak contrary to such a person, saying that they should pray first, they ask their question: "Why wouldn't God want it? It's good, so I should do it!" But the truth is that such a person is being their own god, even if they don't realize it. Nowhere in the Bible does it say "if you think it's a good thing, then just do it."

If we knew what was right and could apply it without God's guidance, then why would we need a Savior? Even as believers, we still sin, take wrong turns in life, and make mistakes. So if we knew what was best, then why do we do these things?

Yet when we receive Jesus as Savior, we also receive the Holy Spirit for counsel, guidance, direction, wisdom, and holiness. Rather than seeking the tools to grow, we as Christians have been given the ultimate tool already: the Holy Spirit. He is the counselor and deposit that guarantees our salvation. How does He guarantee it? By instructing us on how we should live, act, conduct ourselves, and apply the word of God on a daily basis.

He gives us strength to overcome all things as we learn to rely on Him. We don't need to search for more tools to grow; we have the only tool we need. But will God use all these other things? Certainly, if we are led by Him to these things!

So all we really need to do is grow in understanding how to tap deeper into the tools we already possess. Rather than living by our own will and trying to grow of our own accord, we must seek the Lord's will to live by it. We are commanded to seek and inquire of the Lord like David did to live by His word. We are justified when we live by His word. Why? Because it is

written,

> "…faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17)

And again,

> "For by grace you have been saved through faith…" (Ephesians 2:8)

We are saved by hearing and obeying the words of God through practice. We must be diligent to obey the Holy Spirit and carefully listen for His voice in our lives. As I have said before, so now I say again, "If a person does not live according the Holy Spirit's conviction, what does he live according to?"

Remember that it is written,

> "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

Indeed, God has prepared works for us to accomplish on a daily basis since the foundation of the world; not merely good things that everyone should do but designed works for the individual to practice on a moment-by-moment basis. The law is fulfilled by those who walk in the Spirit. As we read,

> "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." (Galatians 5:18)

And also,

> "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

Knowing that we are justified by faith, one must ask, "Where does faith come from?" But what do we read?

> "…faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17)

But if anyone seeks to be good by practicing the words without the leading and interpretation of the Spirit, they sin. For it is written,

"…whatever is not from faith is sin." (Romans 14:23)

Knowing then that faith comes by hearing the word of God, we must be diligent to obey Him. For God speaks to us constantly through the Holy Spirit. He is God's refining fire who cleanses our walks and refines our hearts that we may be holy before God.

The word "holy" comes from a root word meaning "to make whole." Therefore it is easy to surmise that the "Holy" Spirit makes us whole in Christ through His inward abiding and guiding. Thus we must remain submissive to His voice and obey it always. If we do not let Him guide us but seek to be justified through applying the Bible when we read it and how we interpret it, then we are no different than the Pharisees.

To work out the Scriptures for yourself is working in legalism. Those that live according to the law are not justified, but those that listen to the Holy Spirit, believe Him, and obey Him are justified. For it is written,

> "But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just shall live by faith.' Yet the law is not of faith, but 'the man who does them shall live by them.'" (Galatians 3:11–12)

Now as we know, the Law was the written code of the Jews by which they needed to live. They took the words of the Old Testament then tried to apply them just as they read them. Yet the issue in Jesus' day is that the Jews were not applying the word of God according to the direction and leading of the Holy Spirit. For if they had been led by the Holy Spirit, they would have not crucified the Lord. And we can see the difference between those who were led, such as John the Baptist, and those who weren't, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Nevertheless, God permitted such men to rise up so that the prophecies might be fulfilled and that all men might find salvation through their being rejected as a nation.

How this applies to Christians today is that they see how the Jews made a mistake and don't take it to heart. All the word was written to be profitable

to a believer's walk. Yet similar to the Jews, some believers are accidentally emulating this pharisaic tradition by how they seek to honor the Lord. They read their Bibles then try to apply the Scriptures as they read them without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Remember that He who wrote the word should interpret to us both the meaning of the word and how to apply it.

Yes, God has given us a mind of our own to be able to practice His word, but ultimately, He needs to have the final say in our walks. So rather than asking yourself "Why wouldn't God want it?" ask God *if* He wants it. When you made God the Lord of your life, you surrendered control to Him. Let Him control your destiny by controlling the daily destination of your walk. Remember that we read,

> "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God." (Romans 8:14)

That is one verse you should memorize and apply daily. Let God lead you in all your conduct. Learn what it means to be led by the Spirit, and seek to apply it daily. Let Him direct your steps. For we also read,

> "O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps. (Jeremiah 10:23)
>
> "A man's steps are of the LORD; how then can a man understand his own way?" (Proverbs 20:24)
>
> "Now you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, *and I will teach you what you shall do*." (Exodus 4:15)
>
> "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." (Proverbs 3:5–6)

But that we don't know the way we should go is evident, as it is also written,

> "I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before

> them, and crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, and not forsake them." (Isaiah 42:16)

Therefore we read,

> "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye." (Psalm 32:8)

And His eye is the Holy Spirit, who sees all things and searches the deep things of God (see 1 Corinthians 2:10). Indeed, God leads us by ways we do not know. For He is wiser than we are, and He alone knows the way to salvation. Therefore we read,

> "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" (Isaiah 55:8–9)

Jesus is choosing a way higher than our own, and He leads us to it through the Holy Spirit. Let the Father direct your steps; let Him show you His daily will that you can live by it for we are called to live by the will of God on a daily basis, not only in the big decisions of life but all the little ones as well.

This is by no means a self-imposed religion but a God imposed one. As God shows you His will, you submissively obey it and listen to His Holy Spirit. We are saved by His word; therefore be diligent to seek it. Remember that the Bible was written by the Holy Spirit. Both His voice and the Scriptures He wrote are together the word of God. Live by His word perfectly, not merely trying to practice what you read but seeking God's guidance in the daily application of His word.

But self-imposed religion uses much human logic to justify itself rather than letting God lead the way. Such people will use phrases and questions such as, "Why wouldn't God want it?" or "I don't think God would care if we do this or that," or "I don't see what's wrong with this choice." In these statements, a person is speaking for God rather than giving God the opportunity to speak for Himself.

We should seek to apply what we read but by laying our hearts before

God first. As we stated at a previous point, we need to sit forward and listen for the Lord. If we aren't seeking the opportunities to apply His word, we may not find them.

For example, if we sit in our own little world at church and don't talk to anyone, we may not see or hear of a believer's needs. How can we fill them if we aren't aware of them? In this, we need to keep open ears and open eyes to perceive need. Then by making oneself sensitive to others' needs around them and by being sensitive to the Holy Spirit's voice, we are opening our hearts to provide.

There are times that God shows us a person's need to fill it. In such cases, He has already told us what we should do, and rather than seeking Him further on it, we should just obey. This is where some people may get a little confused in their walks by saying, "If you see need, fill it, and if it's a good thing, do it." But in truth, these good things God has already told you to do, but you may not be recognizing His voice. Merely obey and love your brethren as you are called to do. Seek every opportunity to apply His word, and take advantage of every opportunity the Holy Spirit supplies; in this, you will be walking in the Spirit and applying righteousness. By doing so, you'll be committed to a life of God's greatest good.

Ultimately, as we discussed much earlier in Colossians 1:9–10, we need to establish all things in the will of God. By this, we become fully pleasing to Him, and through this, we bear every good work and fruit. Now we can see the need for a work to be done, but it is God who opens our eyes to it. When we seek to do good works, we will notice the need for them more.

When God opens our eyes, then He's leading us to accomplish those things He's showing us that need to be done. Yet all things should be soaked in prayer and covered in the Spirit of God. We aren't right about everything we think God is telling us to do. We need to be certain that God is calling us to particular good works before we commit them that we may be led by the Holy Spirit in everything we do.

For example, if you want to start an orphanage, ask God to see if that's the calling He has laid in your life. If you're considering taking your ministry in a certain direction, soak it in prayer. If you want to give money to a poor brother or sister, ask God first. Maybe He'd rather have you buy the things they need than just give them the money. Yes, we should fill their need, but

God may have planned a better way for us to fill it.

We don't know what will encourage and affect the hearts of people the most. But God knows all these things and what is most beneficial for everyone. Therefore we should seek Him on all things and live according to His will.

For example, I once knew an old missionary preacher. He travelled from nation to nation sharing the gospel and providing for the poor. Now, there was in one particular African nation a young man who wanted to be a pastor. This young man begged the missionary to train him up that he could guide the church. So the missionary prayed, and when he saw this young man next, he turned him down. God told this preacher that He had a different plan for him and that this young man ought to pray and be led by God.

When he told him that, the young man argued, "He who desires the position of a bishop desires a good work!" But then the old preacher reminded him, "Yes, the work he desires is good, but that doesn't mean the desire he has for it is God's best." So he encouraged the young man to pray and seek the Lord for His will. After praying and fasting for a week or two, God informed him that he was to open an orphanage. So he went back to his native country in Liberia and opened an orphanage. Then within a year God blessed 900 orphans with a home, food, love, and the gospel of Jesus. Had he not obeyed, then what would have happened to all those souls who wouldn't have received the love of Christ? Now that young man isn't young anymore, and that ministry has tended to thousands of homeless and orphaned children.

When we live out God's will, we glorify Him. When we seek His will, we're walking in holiness. We are made whole through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads us according to the Father's will, and as we obey the Spirit, He makes us holy. Thus by seeking and walking in the Father's will through constant obedience to the Holy Spirit, we are made Holy. So in short, we find perfect completion through listening to and being led by the Spirit as He fills us.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit makes us complete in all things. For by Him we gain the wisdom and mind of Christ. By Him we acquire the heart and love of God, and through Him we conquer every sin. Our sins reign in our flesh until we learn to submit to the Holy Spirit on a continual basis.

Every work of the flesh is sin, and the battle between right and wrong is

manifest in the two natures. The two natures, as we know, are the nature of the Spirit and the nature of the flesh. Paul discusses this concept in the battle of the inward man.

The flesh stumbles at the law, but by walking in the Holy Spirit, we fulfill the law by nature. There is no need for legalistic practices but rather a need for obedience to the Spirit.

As we obey Him, He strengthens us to fulfill the word He gives us. We are justified by faith, and faith enters whenever God speaks. Faith is found through the words of God in the Bible and the words He speaks to us on a daily basis through the Spirit. The Holy Spirit leads us in a perfect path. As we obey Him, we by nature fulfill the law and overcome sin. As it is written,

> "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." (Galatians 5:16–18)

But that the works of the flesh are sin is evident. For we also read,

> "Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:19–21)

Those that practice sin are not saved. Those that practice sin walk in the flesh, but those that practice righteousness walk in the Spirit. Therefore if we love the Lord, let's make it our aim to walk in the Spirit always. This is how we truly commit ourselves to a life of good: by committing to hear and obey the Spirit at every moment of life.

In order to hear the Spirit more clearly, we need to meditate on His presence at all times. This is how we sit forward in our chair to hear from Him, as we mentioned earlier. Two of the best ways to meditate on Him are through prayer and worship. By doing these, we're focusing on His presence.

When we focus on Him, it's easier to hear Him. Before reading your Bible, spend some time praying and worshipping. Then afterward you'll hear Him more clearly as you read.

Now if we walk in the flesh we sin, as we know. But when we focus on the Holy Spirit, the Spirit changes the desire of our heart to desire Him rather than the things of the flesh. Thus we are empowered to overcome as He changes the nature of our hearts. Therefore we find that as we walk in Him, we are made whole through Him.

As we meditate on Him, it becomes easier to hear His voice. When we hear Him, we walk by faith. If we focus on the flesh, we walk by failure, but if we focus on the Spirit and obey His voice, we overcome all things through faith.

Draw nearer to Him, and it will be easier to hear His voice. As you draw near to Him, He'll draw near to you through the process.

As it is written,

"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you…" (James 4:8)

So draw near to God, and it will be easier to hear His voice. By this it will be easier to walk in faith, as we will hear His word and know His will for us more clearly. When we are led by faith, we are led in victory. We are led by the Spirit when He speaks and we obey Him. Thus to walk in the Spirit is to walk in righteousness. Righteousness is faith in motion. Faith is obedience to God's voice—not merely His written word but His voice.

His Spirit shows us how to apply the Scriptures on a day-to–day, moment-by-moment basis. This is where we find the difference between walking in the law and walking in the Spirit. We are walking in the law when we read the Bible and try to apply its principles without any direction from the Holy Spirit. We walk in the Spirit when we hear His voice and obey. Thus God, who leads us to righteousness through His Spirit, fulfills all righteousness in us through obedience to His voice.

The Spirit is our strength and victory in all things. If anyone is caught up in temptation, they can overcome it easily through the power of the Spirit. But how do we apply the power of the Spirit? Through meditating on Him. Indeed, we sin because we have taken our focus off of God.

It is impossible for a person to worship in the Holy Spirit—focusing on

the presence of God—and sin at the exact same time. God and sin cannot be in the same place at the same time. When the Holy Spirit is upon you, you're given the strength to overcome all things. Just think of Samson! But if you focus on the mundane details and idle things of life, you can be distracted and succumb to sin more easily.

Ultimately, we get caught in temptation when we turn our focus away from the Lord. When we no longer meditate on Him, temptation is right around the corner. In order to be tempted, Satan has to take your focus off the Lord then refocus your attention on something the flesh desires. In order to overcome the sin, we merely need to refocus on the Spirit.

When we focus on the Spirit, we are walking in the light of God's eye. For the Spirit is God's eye, and by Him we see the spiritual paths we need to take in life. For it is written,

> "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye." (Psalm 32:8)

And again,

> "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light." (Matthew 6:22)

Are not the eyes of God good? Therefore if you are led by the Spirit, you will be full of the light of Christ. Now when we are not being led by the Spirit, we are walking in the flesh. When we walk in the flesh, we sin. If we have a tendency to be idle (not meditate on God), we are more likely to succumb to temptations and form bondage. A good rule of thumb is that if you can't focus on the Holy Spirit while you do any given activity, then it is likely sin or idleness.

Examine yourself to see if there are any idle works in your life. If you find any, then commit yourself to a life of good works, which are done through the Spirit. Abstain from idleness, and commit yourself to a life of good. By meditating on the Spirit, it will be easier to walk in constant victory, encouragement, and power. When hard times come, it'll be easier to get through them because your heart is accustomed to rejoicing in the Lord rather than dwelling on your own heart.

Now if anyone is caught up in the heat of temptation, it is easy to

overcome. Just turn your heart to prayer and worship and focus on the Spirit. Remember that we sin and are tempted when we don't focus on the Lord. But when we focus on ourselves, the desires of the flesh, or the tempting situation, we fall.

When we're tempted, we're called not to fight the temptation but to flee. As we know, we are called by God to resist the devil. Yet some people don't realize that when they're tempted, it's no longer about just Satan. They try to resist the situation only to find themselves failing. Why? Because temptation is not found in Satan but in our flesh. Those that resist temptation are not resisting the enemy but their own hearts. Rather than resisting our own hearts, we are called to meditate on the Lord that we may conform our heart to His. This is why we resist the devil and flee from lust. As it is written,

> "Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." (2 Timothy 2:22)

We are not called to resist the temptation but to run away from it altogether. But to where do we run? The furthest possible place away from sin. And what is the furthest thing from sin? God. God is the furthest place from sin, and when we're tempted, we are called to flee into His arms. Thus we overcome temptation by meditating on the Holy Spirit because there is no sin in the Spirit. Therefore when He is upon us, we have the necessary power to overcome all things. Again, there is a difference between having the Spirit and having Him upon you. He is upon us when we walk in Him, and we don't always walk in Him as we're supposed to. But if you walk in Him, you will be strengthened to overcome everything that comes your way.

Now if you find yourself caught up in the heat of the temptation, the best way to apply this concept is first with prayer then later through worship. When you're tempted, merely pray from your heart, "Lord, lead me not into temptation but deliver me from the evil one. Be my strength in my weakness." Then have faith that He will. If you don't have faith, then this prayer will do nothing for you. All prayer must be done in faith, and without faith, prayer is worthless.

For if we do not have faith, with the mouth we ask God for our needs

and with the heart we don't believe He will give us the things He has promised. In this, we are being unstable of heart and double minded. Therefore have faith in the Lord's promises and that He intends to fulfill them because He loves you.

But that faith gives us victory is evident. As we read,

> "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith." (1 John 5:4)

When we have faith, it empowers us to overcome, yet our faith must be in God's words. As we've said before,

> "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17)

This is why the prayer works to overcome temptation—because they are the words of God. For Jesus told us to pray thus:

> "And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." (Matthew 6:13)

By this scripture we know that Jesus was exhorting us to pray when we're tempted and to ask for strength.

As Jesus also said,

> "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

Jesus told us to pray and suggested that by prayer we'd find the necessary strength to overcome all things by faith. Thus it is His promise to strengthen us, and we must have faith in His word.

Now, the last half of the prayer to overcome sin is a phrase Jesus spoke to Paul. As we read,

> "And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'" (2 Corinthians 12:9)

When we struggle in the heat of the moment, we need to pray and

refocus on the Holy Spirit. Then He will strengthen us in our weakness. His strength is made perfect in our weakness because in our weakness, we are forced to operate in faith, and by this He is glorified.

As we walk in the Spirit, we fulfill the law naturally. If we try to practice what we read without being led by the Spirit, we are practicing the works of the law and not the good works of the Spirit. But if we operate in the Spirit, we are no longer under the law. As we said before,

> "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." (Galatians 5:18

If we work through the Spirit toward one another, we will be presenting Christ to each other appropriately. In this, you will be a tremendous encouragement to those around you. As you commit yourself to working, walking, and operating in the Holy Spirit, it will change your life through God's work in you. Also, it will change your life as you grow in loving with Christ-like conduct toward others. These will be encouraged by God's works in you to go and do likewise. Thus you will become a spark that kindles a whole forest with the fire of God.

And doesn't the Lord repay you for this? Therefore when you commit to good works, commit to doing them through the Holy Spirit. Thus as you show kindness to your neighbor, you will be giving them the perfect work of love, ordained and completed by God in you and through you.

Thus we must pursue and maintain good works although we say that we must be led by the Spirit in them. As we read,

> "This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men." (Titus 3:8)

Remember also what Jesus said?

> "Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy." (Matthew 5:7)

Beloved, seek to be merciful, and you will obtain it. Press into works of love and kindness and so portray Christ. Remember that if you seek you will

find, if you ask you will receive, and if you knock the door will be opened to you. How much more if you seek the Lord in regard to providing for others' needs? For in showing the love of God, you fulfill the Law. As we read,

> "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14)

And how shall we love our neighbors except by showing it?

> "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him." (1 John 3:18–19)

First show good works to the brethren for they are faithful to Christ and deserve deliverance over an unbeliever. Then after having an in-reach, have an outreach. Stabilize the structure of God's building before trying to add more bricks to the wall. Some have a habit of doing sloppy work in building the body of Christ and leave the walls unstable.

Some evangelize and create new bricks for the wall but do not support or stabilize these people, which leads to a breakdown in understanding the Gospel and can create division and church splits in the long run. Let the love of God compel us to take care of one another, then together as one strengthened arm, let us reach the hurting and lost among the unbelievers. And as Jesus said,

> "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34–35)

And as it is also written,

> "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:16–17)

Which is why we also read,

> "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also." (1 John 4:20–21)

If we don't seek to love one another, then we aren't walking in love. Remember that there is no grey area in Christ. Either you build up in love or scatter abroad in hate. If you love your brethren, you will show it to them. Love, being a verb, is in itself an action word.

That means that those whom we tell that we love we also need to show that we love. If we say we love someone, we need to do something with our love for it to actually be love. How can you claim to love someone if you see that they have need but refuse to fill it? There are no works of neutrality. If we don't fill a need, then we just worked out hate and not love. Yet Jesus commanded us to love one another. And as it is also written,

> "And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment." (1 John 3:23)

We fulfill the law by walking in the Spirit through love. If we walk in love toward one another, then we honor God, but if not, how can we claim to be His children? For how will Jesus judge us all? What do we read?

> "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

> “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’
>
> “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’
>
> “Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31–46)

How did Jesus judge the believers? Did He say, “My blood covers their evil; let them enter”? Or did He say, “You showed works of love; come enter”?

He pointed out the fruit of the Spirit in the people. The first fruit to receiving God’s Spirit is love. Now, fruits are borne naturally on a plant. But a plant that is not properly cultivated may not bear any fruit at all. And if it doesn’t bear fruit, what does Jesus say?

> “Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, ‘Let no fruit grow on you ever again.’ Immediately the fig tree withered away.” (Matthew 21:18–19)

This wasn’t merely a miracle He performed but also a parable in

miracle form. We are like that tree, and we should always be bearing the fruit of God's love both in season and out of season. There should be no end to the fruit we bear. But if we don't cultivate ourselves in the word of God, we will not bear His fruit. So be submissive to His voice and obey Him. Seek to walk in love, and pray for opportunities.

Don't be caught up only in studying the Bible or in trying to display the gifts of the Spirit. But be fervent to display the fruit of the Spirit. Sensitize yourself to love others, and pray before you do any works. Let God establish you in your works, and He will be glorified. As it is written,

> "Commit your works to the LORD, And your thoughts will be established." (Proverbs 16:3)

Now, some ride on grace alone. They don't feel that it's necessary to practice the works of loving kindness through the Spirit. They confuse the works of the Spirit with the works of the Law. The works of the Law were written to show the Jews who Christ is when He would come.

Also, it showed them that they don't have what it takes to please God without Jesus dwelling in them and working through them. For no one is established by the works of the Law but by obeying the word of faith. As it is written,

> "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." (James 1:22–25)

The law of liberty is not the same as the Law of the Old Testament. The Law of the Old Testament is something a person would read then try to apply in their life only to find that they can't perform what is good. But the law of liberty suggests that all things are fulfilled naturally by working out love through the operation of the Spirit of God.

Some confuse these two concepts and believe that they don't need to do any works, because works don't save us. Indeed, the works of the law do not

save us, but if you respond rightly to the gospel, you will desire to love through Christ as you are commanded.

Yet those that believe that love doesn't need to be worked out are sinning and only fooling themselves. If we don't take works of love seriously, then there is a judgment. As Jesus said,

> "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:21–23)

What fulfills the law? Love. Therefore what is lawlessness? To not walk in love. These people called Jesus their personal Lord and Savior but didn't walk in love. Indeed they called Him Lord. Hence Jesus said, "Not everyone who calls me Lord." These people even committed powerful miracles and did mighty wonders and signs. While they are not fruits of the Spirit, these signs were manifestations of the Spirit. By this it is obvious that they had the Holy Spirit but did not obey Him or walk in His love. For signs follow those that believe. As we read,

> "And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:17–18)

These people who were lawless were evidently believers but did not practice the whole word of God. Let that sink down into your heart, and be fervent to love the Lord. If we don't fulfill the love of God, we will be the ones crying out "but Lord, Lord!" God is always good, and we should be as well. As Jesus told us,

> "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

In Matthew chapter five, Jesus was exhorting us to love even our enemies, by which He later made the statement that we must be perfect. By this He was proclaiming that perfect love perfects us inside and out. Even as it is also written,

> "But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection." (Colossians 3:14)

Thus we must love brethren in deed and in truth. Even as we also read,

> "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him." (1 John 3:18–19)

If you want your heart to have the feeling of assurance in your salvation, then walk in love. You will have a continual peace govern your heart because you know that you loved everyone to the fullest as God told you. This takes a passionate heart full of mercy. But in the end, it breeds a true sense of peace and boldness—boldness to know that God's judgment is a blessing for you. Not because of any of your works, but because of your submitting to the Holy Spirit, He has worked love through you. Thus you are justified by faith, obedience, and perfect love. But that love produces boldness is evident. For it is also written,

> "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world." (1 John 4:17)

See that it says "as He is." The word "is," as we know, is present tense. So this isn't past tense like trying to figure out how to act like Jesus would have. This isn't about the phrase "what would Jesus do?" This is about listening to God and submitting to what He is doing *NOW* in you and through you.

Then because you were like Him, having operated in the Spirit through obedient faith, you have boldness. For His love has been at work in you and through you, and now having been justified by love, even before judgment, you have boldness—boldness to know where you are going, confidence that you are pleasing the Lord daily, and at peace with His promises because you

know you are partaking in them.

Now, there are many Christians that feel as if they walk in love as they should already. But take the time to reflect on your own heart. Ask yourself if you've been loving the stranger as Hebrews 13:1–2 commands you. Even if you don't entertain an angel, if it is your brother whom you are loving on, then you are fulfilling the law of love. Consider whether you've been as welcoming as you should be to those you don't know. Have you been judgmental toward anyone? Always ask yourself how you can improve in showing the love of God. Then apply His love.

So if you want peace and confidence in your walk, walk in love and obey the Holy Spirit. In this, you are committing yourself to a life of good, not of legalistic works and random acts of kindness.

Rather, you are submitting to God's planned works of love—the plans He has had for you since before time. But that God has works for you to practice is evident. For it is written,

> "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

God has prepared works for us to walk in. If we truly want to please Him, then we must obey Him. We must remember that He has a mission for us and that we need to fulfill it daily. These works aren't merely the major things in life but all the little things along the way.

God has ordained the direction we should go, and we are commanded to follow Him. The mission He has for each of us is different for each of us. We all are a body but different digits of that body. The foot has its own work it does, and the hand does its own work. Each of these do not do what the other does but have been given their place by God that the whole body may walk, talk, and work as it ought.

Even so, God has given each of us our individual mission in Him. It is part of our personal relationship with Him, and by being dedicated to it, we are dedicating ourselves to Him. Thus we must be committed to a life of good —the good works God has ordained for us, which complete the personal mission for each of us. Thus God gives us a purpose and a meaning for our lives on this earth, with the ultimate meaning of life being a personal

relationship with Jesus.

By being committed to a life of good, we are really submitting to the will of the Father and choosing to be led by and obey the Holy Spirit. God has already prepared those good works for us; all we need to do is humbly submit and obey the plan He has.

But in this, we need to remember the habit of self-awareness. We need to test ourselves to see if we are really walking out the faith according to His personal design for us.

We need to be circumspect to the needs of others around us, and if anyone in need is laid at our feet, we must love them. Now, love is a deed and not merely an uplifting encouragement as we established by the scripture, which said,

> "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." (1 John 3:18)

If anyone is laid at our feet, then we must relieve them from their sufferings. For it is written,

> "And let our people also learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful." (Titus 3:14)

Now also consider that if works weren't necessary, then why would we be exhorted to maintain them? So consider yourself in their shoes, and remember to work out perfect love. Do not consider what they would expect from you if you were they. Consider what you would do for yourself if you were in need. Would you look for a job if you needed one?

Would you pay a month of rent or two if you could afford it so you don't lose your house and everything you own? Would you buy yourself a bag of groceries every week if you could afford it? If you can afford these things for yourself and have enough to spare, then consider helping them in this. Meet each need, and fulfill them perfectly. Do not leave anything undone if it is in your power to save them.

For this is the true and perfect love of God. But if you claim to have faith, then let your faith be proven. Show your faith through operating in love. Be dedicated to goodness and kindness, and watch it change your life as you change and bless the lives of those around you.

For in this, God will bless your life even here on the earth. Yet not immediately and especially not for those that only do it for a reward. But those that love with sincerity, hoping for nothing in return, God will bless.

Yet if one should try to stop you, do not say, “Brother, don’t rob me of a blessing!” But rather say to them and in your heart, “Brother, my blessing is to love you with sincerity. Don’t rob me of an opportunity to love you.” Don’t seek the reward, but love with a sincere heart.

You already know that God *WILL* bless you. So don’t do it for the blessing, but be blessed that you can love your brother, and you will receive the blessing of God anyhow. But if you want your faith to be effective, then let it be established through the peaceful works of love. As it is written,

> “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:14–17)

If you see anyone in need around you, don’t forsake them. Take care of them right now! If it is at all in your power, then help them that there may be equality, not that you should suffer and that they should be relieved but that everyone may have the hope of peace through the power of love in motion. Let that love be in motion through you.

Observe those around you, and consider who you can bless. Ask yourself who you’ve blessed today. Those you should bless should be more than your friends and family but even the unfamiliar needy brother or sister in Christ.

If you want to bless someone, start with the believer whether in your church or not. They have been faithful to God, while the world hasn’t been. Is it the fair justice of God for those who love the Lord to be left without deliverance, begging for mercy in their heart, while finding themselves broken, destitute, and hungry while the unfaithful wicked person goes free?

If it seems right that God would deliver a person that loves Him, then you also should be the image of Christ and deliver those that love Him. Thus

the faithful will find the justice of God locked up in your heart through love. If it seems right to you to go to the world first and let your brother hunger while saying, “He has God; God will save Him. This person doesn’t have God,” remember first that the unbeliever doesn’t have God, because they willfully reject Him. Consider also that the next time you suffer no one should save you from it either, not until a long drawn out process of brokenness and pain has completed itself and then finally you can see the restoration of God. If that doesn’t seem fair that it should happen to you, then don’t let it happen to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

It isn’t fair that someone that utterly rejects God should receive the goodness and fatness of God’s blessing while those that have been faithful to love the Lord suffer. It isn’t right that you should suffer in your circumstances nor anyone else that loves the Lord.

Let God work through you, and be committed to loving your brethren. Then as a strengthened unit, along with your brother, go and love on the world for their repentance. But don’t forsake an opportunity to show the good justice of God, and save your brother, whom God laid at your feet.

As you work out perfect love, the world will see it and know you are God’s. For we know that God is love. As we read,

> “And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.” (1 John 4:16)

And that the world knows we are Christ’s, because they see Christ in us, is evident. For as we previously stated,

> “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

Therefore have faith and walk in it. For faith is justified by love. As we also read,

> “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.” (Galatians 5:6)

Be an example to your brothers, and take your walk seriously. Be fervent for Jesus because He’s been so zealous for you. He loves you with an

undying passion. Love Him with the same, and be perfected in His love.

Become someone your brethren can look up to. But don't do this for the sake of being looked upon highly lest pride should enter your heart. Do this to be personal and intimate with the One who's loved you most. Then by nature, your brethren will begin to respect you more. And even if some should not, through your perseverance, they will find the depths of truth and love at work in your life. By this they'll repent, and your persistent love will pay off.

Encourage your brothers to continue in the Holy Spirit and the works of God. Show them how to be obedient through your reverent life. Draw near to the word of God and the voice of the Holy Spirit, and be obedient to it always. Teach others to honor the Lord and worship Him through the example you portray. For it is written,

> "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." (Colossians 3:16–17)

Let everything you do whether little or great be done unto the Lord and in the name of Jesus. Be established in grace with your faith working through love. You will see how it changes your life and the lives of those around you. Then through being like Christ and drawing near to Him, He will change your life forever and for the better.

Conclusion

IF YOU REMAIN committed to these seven habits throughout your life, it will truly change you and bless you. God will lay hold of your life as you explore the depths of a relationship with Him. By changing the way you approach others, it will change how they perceive you and treat you.

This is a slow-going process that requires faithful commitment, but through time and many years, you will see the full working power of God in your life. This is a power that will bless you, give you peace, and make you a beaming light of God.

Be established in His grace, being led by His Spirit always. Love your brethren with sincerity, and watch how you treat them. Change how you approach them, and it will be to not only their benefit but yours also in the long run. Be faithful to God, and love fervently.

The ultimate premise of this book is the commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself. In my short book, *The 7 Spiritual Habits That Will Change Your Life Forever*, we discuss how to change our lives through loving the Lord and drawing nearer to His Spirit. Its premise is loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. If you'd like to dive even deeper in your relationship with Him, then that short book may also be for you.

By being devoted to God in these habits and being established in His love and Spirit, you will see how it changes your life forever. Submit to God, and you'll experience His peace.

Whether in joys or in hardship, you'll always feel blessed somehow. Not only will you find the strength to make it through the most difficult

moments of life but you'll also have joy in Christ during them. You'll not only be strengthened to overcome but you'll come out of a trial with a greater strength than if you hadn't experienced it. Hence every moment of life will truly turn into good. Why? Because you are committed to loving God through loving your neighbor as yourself. And what do we read?

> "But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.'" (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Also,

> "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28)

Be committed to love, and God will commit you to His blessing.

I'd Love To Hear From You

As an author I regard the feedback of my readers highly. When considering a book many people weigh reviews in the balance.

If you enjoyed this book please consider helping others make an informed decision. Leaving a review can help spread the message of the gospel, increase other's faith through these books, and would be a great way to support this ministry for free!

Also By Adam Houge

The 7 Spiritual Habits That Will Change Your Life Forever
(The 7 things that make us most Christ-like)
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(Learning to walk in the power of God by first walking in the passion of Jesus Christ)
Cherishing The Heart Of A Child
(Embracing our children in the love of Christ)
Nurturing A Child's Heart
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(A study to become a disciplined man of God)
Choosing Kindness
(Walking in kindness toward all, because His loving-kindness is better than life)

About The Author

Adam is a preacher, teacher and bestselling author of over 40 books on the Christian faith. He is a devoted husband and father of 3 boys. Through His travels he’s seen the need for a new awakening and a new revival: A revival of the heart. Come join Adam on this journey of redemption and experience God like never before!

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